



MAHARAJA GULAB SINGH AND EXPANSION OF THE NORTHERN BOUNDARIES OF INDIA

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Abstract:

The role of Gulab Singh in the expansion and consolidation of the Sikh Kingdom is well known. This paper focuses on the contribution of Gulab Singh in the extension of the northern boundaries of India in the nineteenth century. The northern areas of the state of Jammu and Kashmir which became the centre of international politics in the centuries to come, were first occupied and integrated by Maharaja Gulab Singh. The paper will highlight how far north of Kashmir, the suzerainty of the Dogra kingdom was spread by Maharaja Gulab Singh.

Keywords: Northern areas, Gilgit, Chushul, Dogra, Indus, Trans Himalayan

‘If Geography is destiny, Kashmir inherited an important role in the history of the subcontinent, situated as it was between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union to the north, China to the north-east, Nepal to the south-east, India to the south, and Pakistan to the west.’ⁱ

The rise of Gulab Singh from a foot -soldier of the plain Kandi area to the reclamer of the Higher Himalayas is a significant event not only in the history of Jammu-Kashmir-Ladakh but also for the history of the entire subcontinent. Neither before nor after him, was any territorial power capable of uniting the unruly and topographically difficult stretch of Dardistan and Western Tibet with the Punjab plains, except the ancient Kashmir king Lalitaditya. In historical sense, the northern areas refer to the areas beyond the river Indusⁱⁱ

which originates from the Mansarovar lake in Tibet and flows through the higher Himalayan ranges in Ladakh. These northern areas formed the boundaries of the ancient Indian land which spread up to Central Asia and incorporated the area around Mansarovar and Mount Kailash, a famous pilgrimage site for many religions of India even today. The march of Raja Gulab Singh up to Central Asia and Mansarovar, thus, may be seen as the reclamation of the ancient Indian boundaries. Not only was he successful in this endeavour, but also, he was able to consolidate Dogra rule over these territories so that it continued for over a century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Gulab Singh, a young boy of sixteen years had made his place in the army of the Lahore Durbar. Through his courage and swordsmanship, he came to occupy an important position in the Lahore durbar within five years. By 1812, his father, Mian Kishore Singh and two brothers Dhyani Singh and Suchet Singh were also taken into service by the Lahore Durbar. The three brothers through their sincere service to the Sikh sovereign attained higher ranks and several principalities. Gulab Singh's service and courage had highly impressed the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, he was given the charge of leading several expeditions for the extension of the Sikh rule far and wide. Gulab Singh participated in the frontier campaigns of the Lahore Durbar and displayed unbeatable warring spirit. During the period of 1818-1820, he participated in the expeditions to Multan, Kashmir and Dera Ghazi Khan. In the year 1819, Kashmir was conquered by the Sikhs and thus the Sikh suzerainty extended to the north, beyond Jammu.

In 1820, Ranjit Singh granted Gulab Singh the jagir of Jammu to eliminate the intrepid hill chief, Mian Dido.^{iv} The taluqa of the chakla of Jammu was granted to Gulab Singh and his family jointly, along with small states of Patti Bhoti, Bandralta and Chineni along with a license to conquer Kishtwar.^v From now on Gulab Singh was given the title of 'Raja' and was permitted to keep an army of his own and collect revenue. Later the 'Rajagi' of Gulab Singh's father was made permanent. With the passing of Mian Kishore Singh in 1822, Maharaja Ranjit Singh conferred the 'Rajagi' of Jammu on Gulab Singh and coronated him on 17 June, 1822. Therefore, after thirteen years of service in the Lahore Durbar, Gulab Singh returned as the ruler of Jammu.

Having conquered major states of the region like Reasi (1817), Kishtwar (1821), Rajouri (1821) and Kashmir for the Lahore durbar, Raja Gulab Singh consolidated his position in preparation to the expeditions in the strategic northern areas of the trans Himalayan region.

Having spent some considerable amount of time in the Lahore court, Gulab Singh had come to understand the complexity of the Anglo-Sikh relations. Moreover, he had become well aware of the British interest in the northern territories of Kashmir, Ladakh and the Himalayan cities and trade routes. He foresighted the important position of the province of Jammu in the British plans of reaching to the strategic north of India. Therefore, he aimed to add to his strength in order to resist the British plans of plying across to the cis-Satluj area and into the Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh and eventually Balitstan regions.

Therefore, he laid siege to the fort of Samartah in (1824-25). It was surrounded by Bandhralta (modern Ramnagar), Mankot (Ramkot), Jasrota and Bhadu. Therefore, it was necessary to occupy Samartah which lay in proximity to the Dogra Raja's other possessions like Badhralta. The siege was successful and the Sikh forces soon came to lay possession. However, it was given to Suchet Singh, along with Ramkot and Samba. He further moved northwards and conquered Bhimbar in 1827-28 along with the territory of Poonch. It is important to note that the province of Poonch was given as a hereditary principality to younger brother Dhyhan Singh, who would later become the Prime Minister of the Sikh Empire.

Having consolidated his position in the Jammu province, with the province of Kashmir being guarded by the Sikh governors, Raja Gulab Singh launched his scheme of extensive campaigns to capture the third major division of the area that is Ladakh. Ladakh was popular for the most lucrative trade in Pashmina shawl wool.^{vi} It was at the helm of international trade and political relations. The envoys from Central Asia and Tibet usually visited Leh. It was deemed necessary to acquire the authority on the trade and the trade routes on the silk route, before the British or Soviet forces could occupy it.^{vii} Thus, the Dogras launched the expedition to conquer Ladakh in the year 1834, under the leadership of the dynamic General of the Dogra ruler, Wazir Zorawar Singh.

It is important to note here, that Raja Gulab Singh had made a confidential enquiry from the British authorities regarding the expedition.^{viii} The British authorities who had limited rights and access beyond the Satluj river, had to give a no objection to such expedition. Moreover, they aspired to enter into friendly relations with Raja Gulab Singh, independent of the Lahore Durbar, in the future. The British authorities therefore saw Gulab Singh's occupation of the northern areas as a way of establishing British hegemony in the Hidukush in future. They also wanted to divert the pashmina trade with Kashmir to other areas.

Thus, the Dogra Army under General Zorawar Singh fought the Ladakhis first at Sanku and then Kartse. Further leading the triumphant march, the Dogras came to occupy the Pashkhyam plains and Sod. The last battle at Langkartse was fought and won. The Gyalpo was anointed as a vassal to Raja Gulab Singh and was further committed to pay indemnity of Rs 50,000 and an annual tribute of Rs 20,000 to the Dogra ruler. The rebellions in Ladakh were finally pacified in 1836 and the Dogra suzerainty extended past the Zanskar which in fact stretched the boundaries of the Sikh empire northwards.

However, in 1839, Maharaja Ranjit Singh died and the confusion of succession at the Lahore Durbar started to make a passage for the British authorities to the cis-Satluj area. Hitherto, Raja Gulab Singh has tried to limit the friendly intercourse of the British travellers with visitors from the neighbouring Central Asia Khanates in Ladakh region.^{ix} Therefore, Raja Gulab Singh decided to launch expedition to conquer Baltistan, the most strategic as well as rugged of the northern areas which would further extend the Dogra boundaries up to the boundaries of Farghana, Kokand and Khotan in Central Asia.

Again the expedition was launched under General Zorawar Singh and Gilgit and Baltistan were conquered by the Dogra Army in the year 1841. In the same year, General Zorawar Singh led his army up to the source of the river Indus in Mansarovar and extended the Sikh Empire till Gartok.^x

However, the battle with the combined Tibetan and Chinese forces in the chilling winter of Decemebr 1841 proved to be the last battle of the triumphant Dogra General Zorawar Singh. The Dogras marched towards the city of Lhasa to conquer Tibet. On their way they overran the two important provinces of Rudok and Gar and moved further twelve miles into the Tibetan territory. The Tibetan governor fled to Chang Thong leaving the country of Rudok to the Dogras. General Zorawar Singh established Dogra rule at the sacred Mansarovar Lake and sent his troops further to Purang to watch over the Lhasa forces. However, the logistical supply of the Dogras ran out in this conflict, after the hard campaigns of Baltistan. To cope with the winter chills, the Dogra troops had to burn the hardwood from the rifles' butt- stock. This gravely compromised the artillery required for the battle against the Lhasa army combined with Chinese troops. On 12 December, 1841, fighting at the height of 15000 feet Above Seal Level, the Dogras of the plains started losing to the Tibetans led by General Shatra.^{xi} General Zorawar who was fighting at the head of his force unhorsed, was wounded by a bullet. He fought gallantly till hit by a spear and died.

Although the Dogra forces were defeated at Tibet, yet the march of the Dogras up to the Mansarovar lake shook the facade of omnipotence of the Chinese Empire. He started making disturbances to overthrow the Dogra rule from Ladakh. However, Raja Gulab Singh, dissatisfied by the Tibetan campaign launched a decisive attack on Ladakh, next year. He led the attack with a force of 6000 Dogra troops and reduced the enemy at Skardu before finally defeating the Lhasa governor Achhanjut at Leh. He was taken prisoner and later sent back to Lhasa after negotiations with the Chinese and Tibetan authorities.

On 17 September, 1842, the Qing Emperor of China and the then Dalai Lama of Tibet signed the treaty of Chushul, with Gulab Singh, restoring the boundaries of the Sikh Empire to southern Sinkiang. The old boundaries were agreed as boundaries between Tibet and Gulab Singh's Ladakh. Gulab Singh was also granted three villages as jagir near Mansarovar.^{xii} This established Dogra hegemony in the said region and added to the boundaries of the Sikh Empire.

In 1846, after the defeat of the Sikhs in the first Anglo-Sikh war, the northern territories of Jammu- Kashmir- Ladakh- Baltistan-Gilgit and parts of Tibet and Pamirs went into the possession of Gulab Singh who was recognized by the British Government and the Government of India as the independent sovereign of these territories of the new state called Jammu and Kashmir, as proclaimed by the treaty of Amritsar, 1846.

In addition to this, it may be mentioned that Gulab Singh was continuously engaged with the affairs in the tribal hill principalities of Dardistan, particularly Hazara and Chilas. Hazara was under the protection of Maharaja Gulab Singh.^{xiii} In the year 1855, the Dard tribals of Chilas started plundering Hazara. This invited the royal attention to reduce the Chilas fort and free the region of the plundering bands of the Chilasis. In the beginning of the 1856, Maharaja Gulab Singh deputed Dewan Hari Chand and others with an army to defeat the tribals. The rebels put up a hard fight in which women also participated and shot musket fires during the day. However, the Dogra forces besieged the fort and cut its water supply. Eventually, the gates of the Chilas fort were opened and the decisive battle was fought in which the Dogras occupied the Chilas fort and put a stop to the pillage of the tribal troops in the adjoining areas.

In this way, Maharaj Gulab Singh, extended the boundaries of the Dogra kingdom far and wide up to the territories in the Karakoram. This not only formed the boundary of the Sikh Empire but also served as the boundary of the present country of India. The annexed regions extending up to the Central Asian states as well as Lake Mansarovar appeared on the world map as part of Jammu and Kashmir state long before the political boundaries of the modern-day India, Pakistan, China or Russia were drawn. The accession of this princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, automatically joined all these areas with India. This is the reason that after several manipulation by the Government of China, Pakistan and the Anglo-American bloc, the significant territories continue to be held legally by the Government of India.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Badehra, Ganeshdas. 2016-17. *Rajdarshani A Persian history of North-Western India from the earliest times to A.D. 1847*. Jammu: Jay Kay Book House, p. 205

^{iv} Dewan, Kirpa Ram. 2005. *Gulabnama*. Srinagar: Gulshan books, p. 107

^v Charak, Sukhdev Singh. 1985. *A Short History of Jammu Raj from earliest times to 1846 A.D.* Jammu: Ajaya Prakashan, p. 472

^{vi} Kapur, M.L. 2005. *History of Jammu and Kashmir the making of the State*. Srinagar: Gulshan books, p. 77

^{vii} *Asiatic Journal*, 1938. No. 26, January 3.

^{viii} Panikkar, K.M. 1989. *Gulab Singh 1792-1858 Founder of Kashmir*. Srinagar: Gulshan publishers, pp. 76-77

^{ix} Warikoo, K. 1989. *Central Asia and Kashmir*. New Delhi: Gian publishing house.

^x Raza, Maroof and Malhotra, Iqbal Chand. 2019. *Kashmir's Untold Story Declassified*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury

^{xi} Bamzai, P.N.K. 2007. *Culture and political history of Kashmir*. Srinagar: Gulshan Books, p. 60

^{xii} Raza, Maroof and Malhotra, Iqbal Chand. Op.Cit., p.5.

^{xiii} Dewan, Kirpa Ram. Op.cit.