

VII-Kingdom of Mountains

Dogras and the East India Company

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The founder of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, Raja Gulab Singh; the royal Dogra coat of arms; and his son and heir Maharaja Ranbir Singh (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

The Treaty of Amritsar, between the East India Company and the Dogra ruler, Raja Gulab Singh on 16 March 1846 was a watershed, for it not only created the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under the suzerainty of the British Indian Empire, it also virtually defined the southern, eastern and western boundaries of a new political creation that elevated the Dogras into being the key players controlling northern India. The war indemnity to be paid on behalf of the defeated Lahore Durbar was reduced from the original rupees 1 crore to Rs 75 lakh because the British wanted to retain strategic control on the territory between the Beas and the Ravi which included the Kangra district of the Punjab because of the strategic value of Nurpur and Kangra forts. The territories over which Gulab Singh then had control as an independent ruler also included the area between the Jhelum and the Indus in which Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the capital of present day Pakistan, are situated. Since this area was too far removed from Jammu, Gulab Singh approached the British to exchange it for certain plain areas near Jammu. This resulted in the Jhelum instead of the Indus River becoming the western border of this kingdom. But the treaty left to further negotiation the actual boundaries of the state as well as the exact relationship J&K would have with British India. This ambiguity was every now and then exploited by both sides.

Lal Singh, the former commander of the Sikh Army whose betrayal of the Khalsa had led to the Sikh defeat, had been rewarded by the British by being appointed the *wazir* to the post-war Henry Lawrence Lahore Durbar. An incredulous Lal Singh could hardly believe what was happening as Gulab Singh had emerged from the entire fiasco of the first Anglo-Sikh War like a cat that had swallowed the cream! In a desperate bid to

thwart the Dogras, the Sikh Governor of Kashmir, Shaikh Imam Ud Din, was asked by Lal Singh not to hand over the Kashmir Valley to Raja Gulab Singh. As the vanguard of the Dogra army reached the valley, it met with stiff armed resistance from the Sikhs, resulting in the death of one of Gulab Singh's senior generals. Only after the British leaned on the Lahore Durbar, instituted a court of enquiry against Lal Singh and a new army was dispatched could Gulab Singh obtain possession of the Valley.

There was also a stipulation in this Treaty that catered for the British keeping a Resident or if necessary, an army in Jammu & Kashmir. The Maharaja however, recognized the suzerainty of the British Government in token of which he was to present annually to the British Government one horse, twelve hill goats and three pairs of Kashmiri Shawls. Henceforth, the British Government of India concentrated on trying to reduce the Maharaja to the status of other princely rulers in British India, while the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir did their utmost to extend their territory, especially in the northwestern and northeastern regions of the state.

After Shaikh Imam Ud Din's resistance fizzled out (he was arrested but exonerated after he produced letters from Lal Singh ordering him to resist the Dogras), Colonel Nathu Shah, who controlled Gilgit on behalf of the Lahore Durbar, also transferred his allegiance to the Dogras. By 1850, the Jammu and Kashmir kingdom included Jammu, the entire Kashmir Valley, Ladakh, Baltistan and the Gilgit region. Gulab Singh's carefully crafted boundaries now extended from the Punjab (British India) in the south to Tibet in the east, Sinkiang and Russia across the Karakoram and the Pamirs to the north while on the western flank the state bordered Afghanistan.

The confused state of affairs where the history of the Dogras and the Sikhs ran parallel, combined with the multiple machinations of the first Sikh War, Raja Gulab Singh's role has been somewhat glossed over! Perhaps the very fact that Gulab Singh's life was divided into two parts—the first in the shadow of the great Maharaja Ranjit Singh while the second half blended with the expansion of the British Empire, has somehow given him the tarnished reputation of a manipulator who 'bought' himself a kingdom. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth and the grant of *de jure* recognition as the master of Jammu and Kashmir can hardly be referred to as a 'Sale Deed'! The fact is that Raja Gulab Singh was already in control of most of the area and would have in all probability fought for the territory if the British had tried to implement the Treaty of Lahore that preceded the Treaty of Amritsar. It is worth remembering that the British had actually approached him with the offer of granting him complete control of Jammu and Kashmir even before the negotiations had begun.

Gulab Singh's stand of neutrality during the first Anglo-Sikh War has also cast a shadow over his reputation. Had he intervened militarily, there can be little or no doubt that the British would have lost the war for despite various other cross-over artists, the Sikhs put up an extremely tough fight and it was touch and go for the British. Gulab Singh, however, as the Governor of Peshawar and the commandant of the Sikh forces in the first Anglo-Afghan war had seen the British operate at close quarters. Even though he militarily did not get involved, it was an open secret as we have noted earlier that he was advising the Lahore Durbar—advocating that the Sikhs do not get involved in a set piece ground battle but make a dash for Delhi itself! This advice was ignored by the other factions in the Lahore Durbar. Besides, the assassination of Gulab Singh's

brothers and family members just prior to the outbreak of hostilities was bound to embitter and distance the man himself from the Lahore Durbar.

The second Anglo-Sikh War took place in 1848 and 1849; beyond a point this had little impact on Jammu and Kashmir even though Gulab Singh once again chose to remain neutral though he allowed his Sikh troops to fight for the Lahore Durbar. It resulted in the subjugation of the Sikh kingdom for on March 30, 1849 Duleep Singh held his last court at Lahore, at which he signed away all claims to the rule of the Punjab. A proclamation by the Governor General of India, Lord Dalhousie, annexing the erstwhile remaining Sikh kingdom, was then read out. The annexation of the Punjab and what subsequently became the North-West Frontier Province by the East India Company was then complete.

Given the fractured state of affairs in the post-Ranjit Singh period, the Sikh defeat and disintegration of their empire was almost inevitable. Even Ranjit Singh had guessed that the British would strike after he was gone, and it is perhaps Gulab Singh's abilities as both a military leader and a statesman that he managed to not only carve out a substantial amount of the area for himself but also created the foundation for it to remain free of the British yoke for the next hundred years. The immediate causes for the Sikh defeat, apart from the machinations of various vested parties in the Lahore Durbar, was the collapsing administrative system of the Sikhs, which resulted in large armies without proper logistical support. Also, the British played the Muslim card to perfection, especially in the frontier districts where they began their own recruitment, constantly playing on the fact that the Khalsa had subjugated them at the turn of the century. This led to a large number of Punjabi Muslims willingly fighting under British officers against the Sikhs. Finally, the British, having consolidated their hold over most of the country by then, also brought to bear overwhelming force against the Sikhs.

Before we leave the Sikhs and move our focus back to Jammu and Kashmir, it is worth dwelling on the effects of the Sikh War for just a while longer. Within a short span of time, the sepoys of the Bengal Army, until then the iron fist of the East India Company's armies in India, rebelled. The British called it a mutiny, the Indians the war of independence. For the Punjab, however, it was a chance to avenge the defeat inflicted by the sepoys on them during the Anglo-Sikh Wars and furthermore, the choice of Bahadur Shah Zafar as the symbolic leader, brought back painful memories of the earlier Mughal-Sikh clashes. The end result was that the Sikhs and the Gorkhas, perhaps the last two bastions to fall before the British held complete sway over most of India, ironically rallied to the rescue of their recent foe. Without the Sikhs and the Gorkhas on their side, it is unlikely that the British would have survived 1857 and then carried on for another ninety years.

Yet survive they did, and in the huge reorganization that followed, not only did the British take Akbar's land administrative methods and hone them into a new system under the Civil Service, they reorganized their Army on Ranjit Singh's methods as well, almost to the extent that even the colour scheme of uniforms for some regiments was taken from Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. The loyalty and bravery of the Sikh and Gorkha troops who fought with the British in 1857 was rewarded by declaring these two regions as being 'martial races'. The exalted status of the high caste Hindu troops of the Bengal Army, recruited from what is now Uttar Pradesh and parts of Bihar, who

had in reality captured and handed the British most of their Empire, was consigned to the dustbin of history.

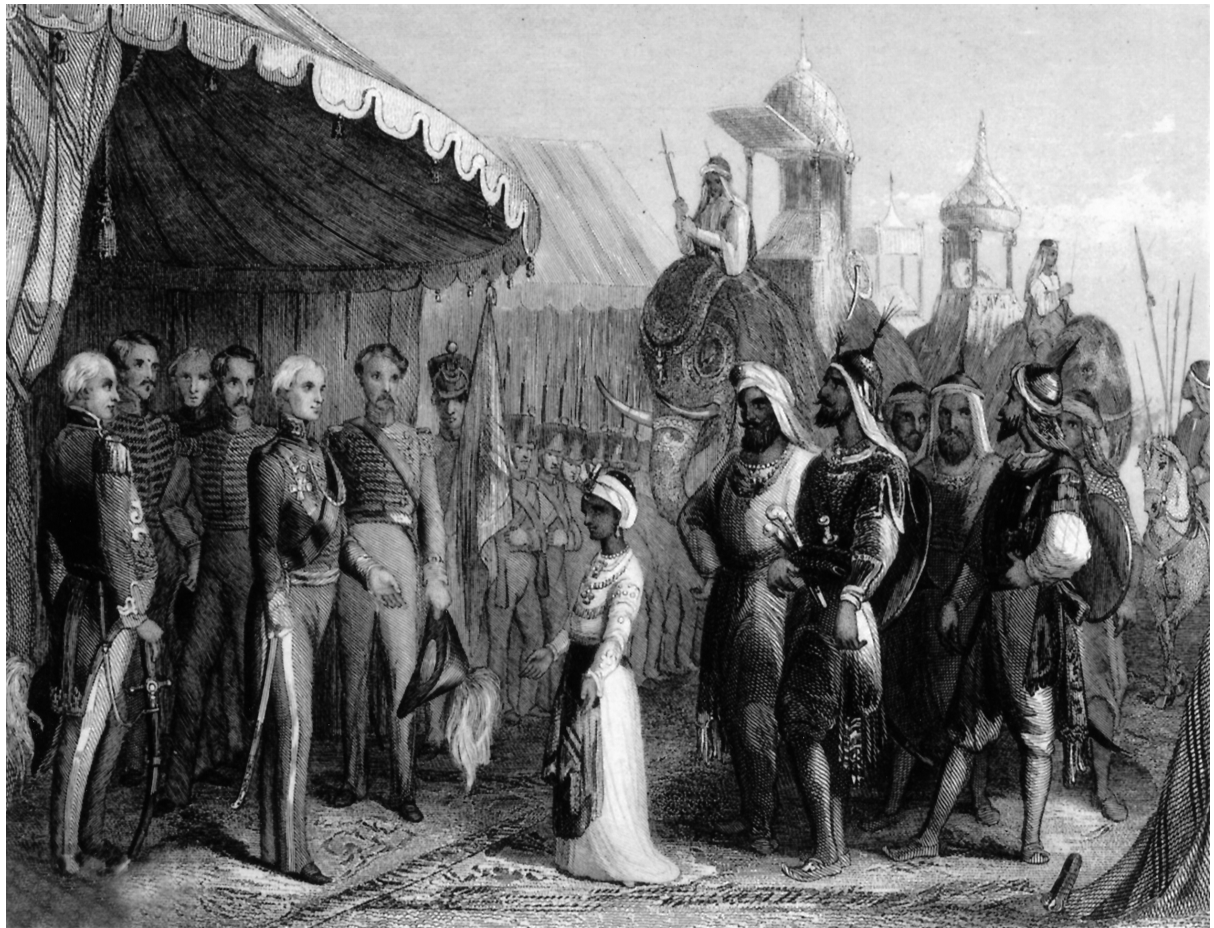
The events of 1857 saw Raja Gulab Singh send his son Ranbir Singh with 2,000 foot soldiers, 200 cavalry and six heavy guns to help the British in the siege of Delhi. Even though Gulab Singh himself died in August 1857, Ranbir Singh kept the British appeased by sending a large amount of money to Punjab for the troops whose pay was in arrears. The 'mutineers' were also forbidden to seek asylum in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. A grateful Queen Victoria conferred on Raja Ranbir Singh the title of the "Most Exalted Order of the Star of India" while at the same time his gun salute was raised from 19 to 21, thereby making him a Maharaja in every sense of the word!

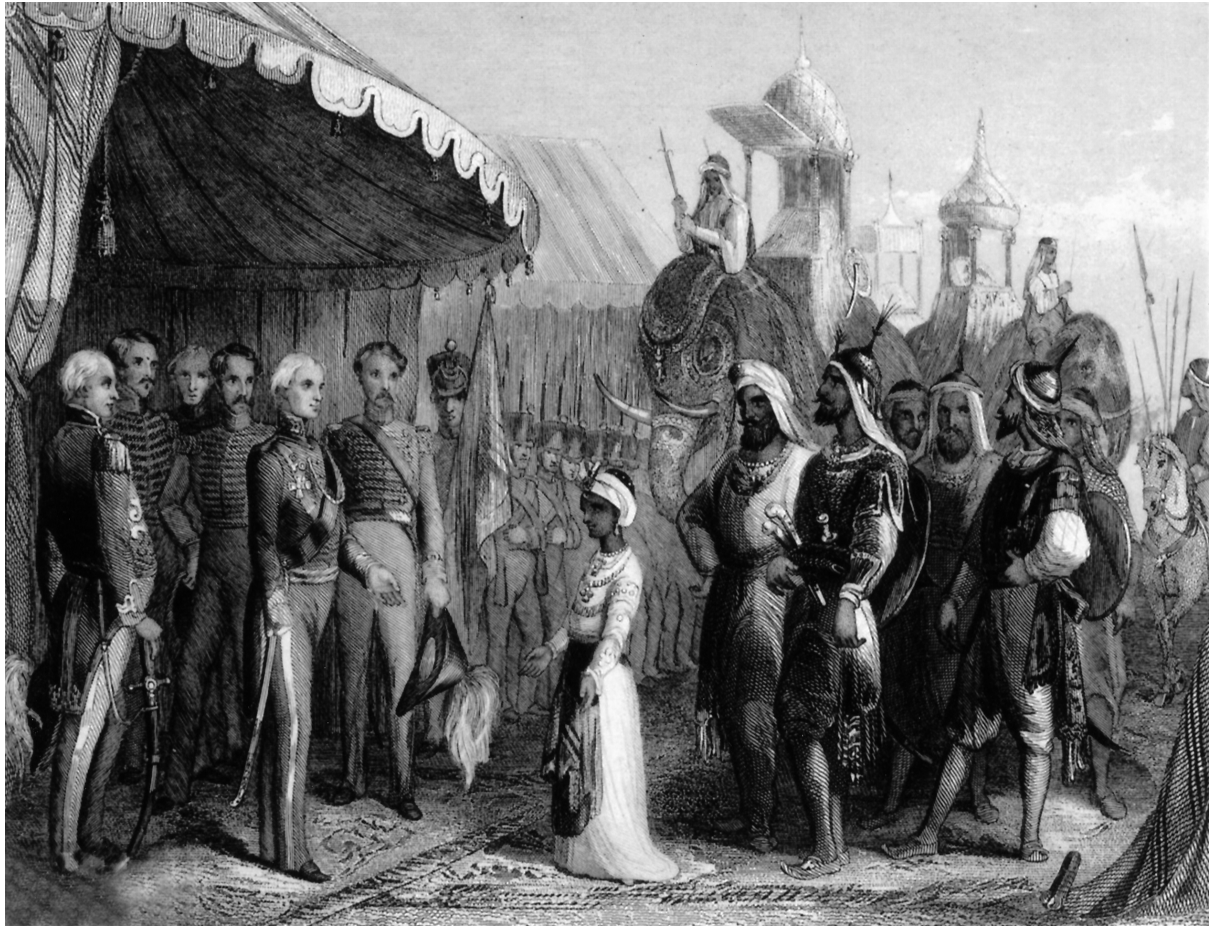
Gulab Singh, having learned from the havoc that followed Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, and had personally handed power to his son and heir, Ranbir Singh, in 1856 while he himself decided to live out the rest of his years as the Governor of Kashmir.

From Gulab Singh's point of view, Gilgit remained a problem area for him during his lifetime. In 1851, with the Rajas of Yasin, Hunza and Nagar, there was a major uprising in Gilgit which resulted in the entire Dogra garrison stationed there being massacred, save a single survivor, a Gorkha woman, who swam across the Indus to tell the story of the disaster. This limited Gulab Singh's frontier during his own lifetime to the Indus River, which flowed east to west in the region, after which it looped around the Nanga Parbat massif and entered the plains of the Punjab.

The equations were changing rapidly at all times. Having subjugated the Punjab by 1849, quite a few British officials now began to look at Kashmir with fresh eyes. The Governor General, Lord Henry Hardinge, considered to be the chief architect of the Treaty of Amritsar, was increasingly under attack from his own ilk for having 'sold' Kashmir to the Dogra chief. Sir Charles Napier, who subsequently was to become the Commander in Chief, scathingly criticized the decision: 'What a king to install! Rising from the lowest foulest sediment of debauchery to float on the highest surge of blood, he lifted his besmeared front and England adorned it with a crown? Cramming down the throats of the Cashmerian people a hated and hateful villain.' Others, equally scathing in their opinion, were also giving voice to the opposition to the Treaty. Herbert Edwards, a British officer who served as an ADC to General Gough, wrote via a viz Raja Gulab Singh: 'He has the cunning of the Vulture. He sat apart in clear atmosphere of passionless distance, and with sleepless eye beheld the lion and the tiger contending for the deer, and when the combatants were dead, he spread his wings, sailed calmly down, and feasted where they fought.' The prose and sentiment, so typical of the British at that time, unfortunately seems to have been bought by most historians.

Pressure began to be put on Raja Gulab Singh to accept a British Resident as was the case with most other Indian princely states, but Gulab Singh held firm. The British once again decided to play the wait and watch game, hoping that like in the case of Ranjit Singh, Gulab Singh's successors too would provide them to implode the state from within. But if Raja Gulab Singh had proved to be a tough 'vulture' for the British to crack, Maharaja Ranbir Singh had further evolved into a 'lammergeier'—the Dogras were there to stay!





After the First Sikh War the British annexed Sikh lands east of the Sutlej and the areas in between it and the Beas; Jammu and Kashmir was detached and the size of the Sikh army limited. After the Second Sikh War the boy-king, Maharaja Duleep Singh was dethroned by Lord Dalhousie and the Punjab was annexed to the British Empire. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

Shiv Kunal Verma is the author of the highly acclaimed **1962: The War That Wasn't** and **The Long Road to Siachen: The Question Why**.