

VIII- Cat and Mouse Games

The British Empire & the J&K Maharajas

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Post 1857 the British Empire reorganized itself, the Crown taking direct control from the East India Company. Unable to get a foothold within the state of Jammu and Kashmir during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign, the British bided their time before moving in during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

I first heard of the *Gulabnama*, written by Kripa Ram, from Tsering Angdu's son, Rinchen, who said a copy written in Urdu and wrapped in red *makhmal* (velvet), had been with the Stakjing family for more than a hundred years if not more. Having already consumed a generous quantity of *chang*, the local Ladakhi brew made from barley, I was not sure if I had heard Rinchen correctly. The last place I expected to find intimate details pertaining to the Dogra dynasty was in the village of Stok, situated on the other side of the Indus River from Leh. In the extreme winter, *chang* successfully does two things—it makes you forget about the bitter cold and secondly, it brings to the fore the philosophical side of men which until then was mostly latent, and so it was with Angdu who declared, 'our past is all around us. If we search, we will find the answers... and sometimes, even when we are not looking, some of those things will find us...'

Persian had been the official language of the Sikh Empire until 1837 after which Urdu and English came into vogue. Taking a cue from the Mughals, most North Indian states from the 16th century had adopted Persian as the court language and as a part of the prevailing culture, historical records, even if panegyric in nature, were maintained meticulously. Kripa Ram's grandfather was Amir Chand who had served under Gulab Singh as the *madar-ul-maham* (prime minister) and *diwan* and his father, Jwala Sahai also as the *diwan* had overseen the transition from the founder of the new state to Maharaja Ranbir Singh. Kripa Ram in turn had inherited the *diwan*'s position and also

authored *Gulzar-i-Kashmir*. Subsequently, *Gulabnama* had been translated into English by Sukhdev Singh Charak and the details pertaining to prevailing situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir at the time are chronicled in great detail. Quite contrary to the picture painted by British writers of Gulab Singh who likened him to an opportunistic 'vulture', Kripa Ram establishes the Dogra ruler as a well-read man who particularly welcomed literary personalities in his court who is quoted to have said 'knowledge has no boundaries in terms of language, religion and ideology.'

Fortunately for the Dogra Dynasty, Ranbir Singh proved to be as astute as his father and also as much a survivor. In the immediate aftermath of the 1857 uprising and the brutal British backlash, he raised a large military force under Colonel Devi Singh, in which every Dogra family was asked to contribute at least one member. This military force also acted as a deterrent should the British decide to sweep into Jammu and Kashmir as a part of the reorganization of the British Empire. However, to keep the military force away from the British radar, the Dogras concentrated on bringing the recalcitrant Rajas of Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar into the fold of Jammu and Kashmir. Subsequently, when Chitral too accepted Ranbir Singh's sovereignty in 1876, the north western boundaries of Kashmir were virtually sealed.

Ranbir Singh now turned his attention to internal reform and his reign was probably one of the most tranquil periods in Jammu and Kashmir's history despite the British desperately trying to somehow get their foot into the door. His involvement in preparing the code of law, both civil and criminal, added immensely to his reputation. With equal care and with an eye for detail, he also organized the Kashmir Army on European lines, even though he retained the use of Sanskrit words of command. This only added to the frustration of the British who could now only hope that the next in line to the Jammu and Kashmir throne would be more amiable to their interests. In 1873, the British made an attempt to force a British Regent on the state, but like his father, Ranbir Singh was equally firm in his refusal. However, during the second Afghan War, fought between 1878-1880, Dogra troops and artillery fought for the British, thereby keeping the show of loyalty to the crown. A note written by the Secretary of State for India, dated 19 October, 1885 says: 'So long as Maharaja Ranbir Singh is alive, the Government of India do not propose to make any change in their existing policy.'

After the annexation of Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar and Chitral, the state's boundaries were more or less complete other than the northern extremities which were still in a state of flux. Geographically the state was now divided into the basins and catchment areas of three major rivers—from north to south, the Indus, the Jhelum and finally the Chenab rivers. The Indus drains the waters of Ladakh, Baltistan and the Gilgit regions before cutting south through the Himalayas into the plains of the Punjab. The Valley of Kashmir along with the districts of Mirpur, Poonch and Muzaffarabad formed the Jhelum basin, while the entire Kishtwar region and the Pir Panjal formed a part of the Chenab's drainage system. Culturally and linguistically, the state could also be divided into six distinctly different zones; again running from the north to the south, Gilgit, Ladakh, Baltistan, the Kashmir Valley, Poonch and finally Jammu. Knitting all these diverse regions and cultures together was the Dogra administrative system.

Ranbir Singh died in 1885. The British were always at their dangerous best whenever any monarch died, for internal squabbling allowed them to exploit the situation to their advantage. Tales from the *Panchtantra* tell the tale of two people fighting over the

division of a fish. The fox arrives at the scene, gives one of the opponents the head, the other the tail while it walks off with the main body of the fish. If the fox was dressed in the colours of the Union Jack, it would have given the tale an extremely realistic twist. True to form, mutual bickering between Ranbir Singh's eldest son, Pratap Singh and his two younger brothers, Ram Singh and Amar Singh allowed the by now desperate British administration to imperiously step in and make the acceptance of a British Resident a pre-condition for giving recognition to Ranbir Singh's successor. Even while the state was still in mourning, the British acted with amazing alacrity—Sir Oliver St John, reaching Srinagar to take over as the first Resident.

With the Resident appointed and in place, Jammu and Kashmir was now at the same level as all the other Indian princely states. Among other things, the strategic implications of this move meant that there would be no troops in the subcontinent under the direct command of Indian officers. Already in the British Indian Army there were no Indian officers, those who did exist were only with the State Forces. Pre-1885, Jammu and Kashmir had been the only state in India which had an Army that wasn't under the control of the British.

Sensing an opportunity to now take over direct control of the state, and also reacting to Russian moves across the Pamirs (this period was when the Great Game reached its zenith) the Maharaja was formally charged with conspiring with the Tsar of Russia to overthrow the British from India. Pratap Singh was stripped of his powers and a five member State Council was formed which ran the state's administration, reporting to the British Resident. Chitral, Hunza and Gilgit now became frontline regions in British strategic thought and it was decided that direct control over these areas was a strategic necessity. A military campaign was conducted between 1889 and 1895 by the Jammu and Kashmir State Forces under the command of British officers. Subsequently, after the campaign ended, Chitral continued to remain under the British even though in theory it continued to be a feudatory of Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1891, London was literally taken by storm when Edward Frederick Knight's book, *Where Three Empires Meet* hit the stores. Paranoia about the Russians was always lurking under the surface, and the publication which gave a graphic account of the campaign brought the strategic importance of Gilgit into the open. The immediate result of this was that the British now tried to get the entire region (what is now known as the Northern Areas under Pakistan's control) under their own influence. A British political agent was stationed at Gilgit even though administrative control remained with the State Government.

By then Maharaja Pratap Singh had all but completely lost the plot; however, he was lucky for the Political Department of the British Government of India over reached. In 1905, it was decided to do away with the Dogra Dynasty completely, but the British machinations leaked to the Calcutta-based *Amrit Bazar Patrika* which took up Pratap Singh's cause. The issue was raised by opposition leaders in the House of Commons which resulted in Pratap Singh getting his powers as the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir back in 1905. However, for the Dogras, it had been touch and go.

The crisis having passed, the modernization of the state under Pratap Singh had begun in right earnest—road links were established between the Valley and

Rawalpindi, Abbotabad and Sialkot, and a host of educational institutions were started while a hydro-electric plant, one of the first of its kind, was set up in Mohra near Baramulla. With the development of Gulmarg and Pahalgam as additional holiday destinations, Kashmir began to emerge as a major tourist destination. From a strategic and military point of view nothing much happened in Jammu and Kashmir during the next two decades. During this period, as World War I swept across Europe and other parts of the world, Maharaja Pratap Singh dispatched the 2nd Battalion of the Kashmir Rifles (a force of approximately 1,200 men) to fight for the British in East Africa.

Pratap Singh was succeeded by his nephew, Hari Singh in 1925. Having spent a fair number of his growing up years in England, the young maharaja speeded up the modernisation process in his state, particularly in the Kashmir Valley. Having watched the British play cat and mouse with his predecessor, distrust of the former was deeply ingrained in his mind. Unfortunately, today Hari Singh is remembered by most Indians and Pakistanis as a waffling, undecided maharaja who took too long to decide on the fate of his state in 1947, and hence contributed in a major way to the so-called Kashmir dispute. However, like Gulab Singh, he too has not got his rightful due from history; and is perhaps one of the most misunderstood personalities in the subcontinent's history.

Until now, we have been looking at the Dogra and British perspective of the events as they unfolded hitherto the Amritsar Treaty. Reduced to a state of just being a statistic, the Kashmiris felt they were being bartered and sold in all directions. By all existing accounts, their economic condition was quite pathetic—a combination of an exorbitant taxation policy, the ban on land ownership and widespread corruption at the administrative level ensured that most people barely advanced beyond the survival level. Gulab Singh, determined to recover the Rupees 75 lakh to the British set the trend of exorbitant tax collection and his successors continued in much the same manner, with virtually every aspect of life being taxable—crops, fruit, grazing animals, handicrafts, carpet and shawl weaving, marriages, ceremonies and, according to some records, even prostitution! Yet in rural Kashmir, crime was virtually unheard of and the people rarely showed any signs of belligerence.

The state also introduced the *begar* system, whereby all subjects had to work on state projects such as road building when called upon. These created major problems for the local population at large for those drafted had no right to refuse and had to accept whatever little or no payment for their services. To make matters worse, most of this work could only be carried out during the summer months when the population most needed to tend to their crops. *Begar* had been officially abolished in accordance with the recommendations of Sir Walter Lawrence (Settlement Officer 1889-95), but in practice, the system had continued virtually unabated.

The grievances of the residents in the State were long standing. State ownership of all agricultural land, the forest administration, police severities, official control over the sale of silk cocoons, unequal taxation, and the partial payments of land revenue in kind instead of cash added to their poor economic condition. To make matters even more explosive, the majority of village schoolmasters, the civil and criminal courts judges, the revenue and forest officers, in fact, the local representation of every department was predominantly Hindu among a predominant Muslim population.

Most of the writers who chronicled the situation in Kashmir during the Gulab Singh/Ranbir Singh period were European, or as in the case of Diwan Kripa Ram, in the employ of the Dogra court. Without taking away from the credibility or observation powers of the westerners, it does seem that when it came to passing judgement on the governance of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, the very same writers and observers became extremely critical. This despite the fact that the situation in most rural areas in the rest of northern India, under British administration, was equally grim! Had the rulers of Jammu and Kashmir resorted to the sort of barbaric acts that the British openly indulged in during the post 1857 uprising, they would have invited the wrath of the same British Raj which would have not thought twice before launching troops to annex the state to the British Empire. As we enter the last leg of the drama that led up to the subcontinent finally shaking off the yoke of colonialism, the British had to deal with an enigma called Hari Singh. In his own way, he would rock the Empire and leave a legacy which even today desperately seeks a solution.



As power politics played out between the Maharajas and the British Empire, the lot of the average man in Jammu and Kashmir as was the case in almost other parts of the country under Colonial rule, remained pathetic. In the Kashmir Valley the *Begar* system further compounded the misery of the people. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

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