

# IX- A Bipolar Universe

## Maharaja Hari Singh's 'Great Betrayal'

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Hari Singh became the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir in 1925 after the death of his uncle, Pratap Singh. Surrounded by the pomp and glory, the 8-year old was to serve as a Page-of-Honour to Lord Curzon during the Delhi Durbar in 1903. Shortly thereafter he was sent to Mayo College, Ajmer, where the British took a keen interest in the future Maharaja's education (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia).

By the time Hari Singh ascended the throne of Jammu and Kashmir, coincidentally on his thirtieth birthday on 23 September 1925, he was already marked by the British as a bit of a wild card. Even though he almost lost his kingdom to British machinations, Maharaja Pratap Singh was the longest serving monarch in the Dogra dynasty, his reign lasting four decades during which time he initiated many a reform that particularly impacted the Kashmir Valley for the better. With no issue of his own, Hari Singh, the surviving son of his brother Amar Singh Jamwal, was to be his heir.

Earmarked for a place in the sun, Hari Singh's grooming was of particular interest to the British Raj. The initiation was early enough—the young prince as an eight-year-old served as a page of honour to Lord Curzon during the First Delhi Durbar held in 1903 where the British, believing in the dictum of the 'Majesty of Governance' left no stone unturned to vow the natives with a glitzy show that placed the '*angrezi hakumat*' at a dazzling, lofty high. Native maharajas, rajas and princess, each wanting to outdo the other, added to the already colourful canvas by being at their grovelling best. Five years later, Hari Singh arrived at the Mayo College in Ajmer, which at the time was the grooming ground for most of the little princelings who were being subjected to a 'public school' education. Most of the boys, mainly from Rajputana, were punch drunk on the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han* by Lieutenant Colonel James Tod, which was a highly detailed geographical and historical interpretation of Rajputana and Central India in which a highly romanticized and colourful narrative built up select Rajput clans who ruled most of the area at the time.

A year after his arrival at Mayo College, Hari Singh lost his father and the British Regent appointed Major HK Brar as his guardian to oversee his education. After completing his schooling, the young prince was sent to the British-run Imperial Cadet Corps at Dehradun for military training, which at the time was a neither-here or there step initiated by Lord Curzon towards the 'Indianization' of the officer corps. After a brief stint there, Hari Singh returned to Jammu and Kashmir where as a 20-year old, Pratap Singh appointed him as the commander-in-chief of the State Forces.

As a young man whose own future was tied to the fate of his uncle, the initial shabby treatment meted out to Pratap Singh and the constant probing by the British to make inroads into the state created a deep-rooted dislike for the British in Hari Singh's mind though he was intelligent and suave enough not to openly show it. The young prince's stay at Mayo College exposed him to the larger picture as some of his peers were from far off princely states like Cooch Behar, Baroda and Hyderabad while his stint at the Imperial Military College would have underlined the sharp divide that existed even between the chosen few and the British officers. The racial barrier, firmly in place post-1857, ensured that officer commissions were reserved only for the governing race and this had been the burning issue ever since the IMC was set up. Though a hard core product of the feudal order where in a self-contained environment questions about one's own social order were taken to be a god given birth right, his exposure to the outside world at both Ajmer and Dehradun was beginning to impact Hari Singh's personality.

By all accounts, and that includes the narratives that are mainly critical of him, the young Hari Singh was an enigma of sorts who introduced various reforms in the state which even by today's standards, were quite remarkable. Pratap Singh had shown the way but Hari Singh took it a step further—he cracked down heavily on the institution of money lending and cancelled some of the largest debts; he threw open the doors of all temples to Harijans and banned the concept of untouchability in the state; he built schools and granted scholarships for poor children (including one Sheikh Abdullah); he banned the concept of low and high castes; he allowed widows to remarry, ended polygamy among Hindus and stopped the Ladakhi system of polyandry which allowed brothers from within the family to marry the same woman and he banned child marriages. Considering that many parts of the country are still bogged down by these very issues and few political parties are willing to tread on this ground even today, these were extremely progressive steps indeed.

During his coronation ninety-five years ago, Hari Singh had said, "If I am considered worth governing this state, then I will say that for me all communities, religious and races are equal. As a ruler I have no religion. All religions are mine and my religion is justice. It is possible that while dispensing justice I may commit mistakes as to err is human. One who says that he does not commit mistakes is not speaking the truth. Only God is free from error. My duty is to look at everyone with equality. I shall, as far as possible, work with justice."

On the other hand, Hari Singh was as addicted to the good life as most of his other princely colleagues, which made them quite vulnerable to some caustic reporting, especially in the Western Press that revelled in painting Indian monarchs as

degenerate characters whose souls could only be saved from hell by the British way of life. *Time* magazine, in its issue dated 8 March 1926 reported: "Occidental moralists were vexed last week as they scanned despatches from that thrice beautiful and opulent Indian native state, the dual realm of Jammu and Kashmir. There the last act of a fairy tale as exotically unmoral as are the majority of "grand operas" was in progress. Before the week was out, a young man who recently paid \$750,000 to a group of international blackmailers, who even then did not keep to themselves the fact that they had surprised him with a certain "Mrs. Robinson" in Paris, brushed aside that fact with a gesture peculiar to statesmen, and ascended the throne whence he will rule over three million souls, over 80,000 square miles with an income of some \$5,000,000 a year.

'The young man, of course, was the once notorious "Mr. A," now Maharaja Sir Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir. During the past fortnight slightly over \$1,000,000 was expended by the State upon a series of coronation fetes which proceeded day and night, to the exuberant delight of the people, who were showered with gifts of food and money. The elephants of participating native princes, groomed carefully for months in advance, at length had their faces painted, their tusks gilded, their backs saddled with howdahs encrusted with gold and gems.'

'On the night before his coronation, Sir Hari and his peers dined off the traditional gold plate, while their underlings supped from silver. Next day he rode out at the head of the state procession of elephants. His favourite pony, which trotted after, was decked with a jewelled harness, containing among other gems an emerald valued at \$150,000. As usual at all great Indian functions, the Maharaja of Patiala was in evidence, almost smothered beneath robes and jewels to a value running well into the millions. For seven minutes, holy water was sprinkled over the heads of Sir Hari and his consort. Then, as Maharaja and Maharani, they ascended the throne of Jammu and Kashmir, "the land of nightingales and roses", the Kasperturos of Herodotus.'

The incident being referred to harked back to 1921, four years before the coronation, and in scathing closing comments that reflected and shaped the majority Western view, the article went on to say 'The frightened young dupe who covered behind the alias of "Mr A" will now be one of the five reigning princes of India who are entitled to a salute of 21 guns outside their own state.'

As a ruler, Hari Singh, despite the mouthing of noble sentiments left much to be desired and this simmering discontent among his subjects was just waiting to explode. The misery of the Kashmiris, especially the Muslims, is quite apparent in the written records of that time. Sir Albion Banerjee, who resigned in 1929 as the foreign and political minister said: "Jammu and Kashmir is labouring under many disadvantages, with a large Muhammadan population absolutely illiterate, labouring under poverty and very low economic conditions of living in the villages and practically governed like dumb-driven cattle. There is no touch between the government and the people, no suitable opportunity for representing grievances and the administrative machinery itself requires overhauling from top to bottom to bring it up to modern conditions of efficiency. It has at present little or no sympathy with the people's wants and

grievances.” It is of course a moot-point that almost all Indian hill states that were under the British administration were in as bad a shape if not worse.

Hari Singh’s relationship with the British, as was the case with his ancestors, held the key to his rule in the state. As the commander-in-chief of the Jammu and Kashmir Army, he had more or less toed the line of appeasement vis a vis the British Empire but from the very day of his coronation, cracks began to develop in his relationship with the British Regent.

Things came to a head in 1930 during the first of the Round Table Conference in London which had been organized by the British Government in response to the growing demands of *Swaraj*. Officially opened on November 13 by King George V, the conference was chaired by the then British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. The Indian National Congress, with most of their leaders in jail as a part of the civil disobedience movement, and most business leaders, stayed away, but Muslim leaders including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Agha Khan, Muhammad Zafrulla Akhan and Muhammad Ali along with Hindu Mahasabha leaders and other liberals did take part. As a part of their strategy to counterbalance the popular representatives from British India, the British had packed the conference with a large number of rulers from princely states. Jammu and Kashmir, as the largest state, had been given pride of place as the foremost princely state in the conference and had been given a disproportionately high representation at the conference.

However, much to their horror, Hari Singh, as the Chairman of the Chamber of Princes, literally knocked the wind out of the British strategy when he got up to make his speech: “While Indian Princes valued the British connection, they had full sympathy for the aspirations of their motherland for an equal and honorable place in the comity of nations.” He went on to add, “as Indians and loyal to the land whence they derived their birth and infant nature, the princes stood solidly with their countrymen for India’s enjoyment of a position of honour and equality in the British Commonwealth of Nations.” This outspoken support to the “seditious” demand for independence came as a major setback to the Government of India, for nobody dared to openly say such things in those days, and in many ways, it set the tone for the First Round Table Conference.

Hari Singh was hence a marked man in the eyes of the British and having been branded as an “unreliable ally”, the alarm bells began to ring amidst the strategic planners of the Great Game in particular. The Gilgit Agency promptly came sharply back into focus, as it was considered to be a key ‘listening post’ for any developments in Central Asia and also a strategic region for the launching of any offensive military operations with a view towards countering Russia which by then had become the Soviet Union. Post 1930 the British began to put pressure on Hari Singh to hand this area over to them. The Maharaja was decidedly loath to do so and at the same time he was not in a position to defy the British Raj beyond a point. The cat and mouse game between Hari Singh and the British continued, but finally in 1935, the Treaty of Gilgit was signed on 26 March, the deed bearing the signatures of the Maharaja and the British Resident of Kashmir, LE Lang. Though Hari Singh had managed to salvage some pride with the British Government making it explicitly clear that the territory

continued to fall within the boundaries of the Maharaja's domain, it was obvious Hari Singh would have to pay a larger price for his 'disloyalty'.

With the British openly suspicious of the renegade Maharaja, the condition of the people made it easy for them to fish in the troubled waters that were prevalent in Kashmir. PN Kaul Bamzai, a Kashmiri scholar who wrote the monumental *History of Kashmir* among other books says: 'The proud Maharaja, ignorant of the forces that were rising at his feet, indulged in cheap pleasures of life and spent most of his time outside the State. The apparent calm and docility of the people lulled him into a false sense of security. But all was not quiet...' Not too surprisingly, the British suddenly found virtue in a people's movement and started encouraging the rise of Sheikh Abdullah as a major challenge to the royal powers in the state. A new dimension had come into play in the power politics of Jammu and Kashmir.



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. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

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