

The philosophy of indirect rule: Colonial context of the formation of Jammu and Kashmir State

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Abstract

The making of the British Empire in India on the one hand was guided by the centuries of experience that the British had accumulated as rulers in different parts of the world and on the other was based on economic rationale and political expediencies. It was for this reason that the nature of British rule in India varied across time and space with sovereignty directly asserted on regions politico-administratively less cumbersome but economically sound. Regions geographically tough and with low economic potential were ruled indirectly. Seen from this perspective the formation of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 and the British decision of handing it over to Raja Gulab Singh was not a novel act in itself - indeed it was in complete agreement with the British philosophy of indirect rule. However, the political motives of creating a new state out of the Sikh state of Punjab can be better explained by placing the newly formed state of Jammu and Kashmir in the context of its immediate neighbourhood – Afghanistan-Punjab context – together with underscoring the impact of Russophobia. The present articles look at the formation of Jammu and Kashmir state from this angle and also point towards the fractures in Sikh polity which deepened after the death of Ranjit Singh marking a shift from centralized to decentralized polity.

Keywords: Indirect rule, Sovereignty, Russophobia, decentralized polity

1. Introduction

The study of empires as trans-civilizational entity having existed in one or the other form throughout the history of human civilization attained much importance / fanfare only recently. This has been seen as an attempt on part of once empire-owners to escape institutional decline and marginalization. The newfound dynamism, diversity and even fashionability that imperial history found nevertheless led to emergence of groups labeling themselves as exponents of new-Imperial history and those termed as old Imperial historians. This being said it is worth mentioning here that it was with the publication of Robinson and Gallagher's article 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' that prominence was given to the distinction between the formal empire of legal control and the informal empire of influence (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953)^[11]. According to them the extension of informal empire was the outstanding feature of Britain's expansion overseas after 1815. The formal empire was the tip of an ice berg, submerged below the water line lurked the invisible or informal empire, which at times was larger than the area under sovereign control (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953; Cain and Hopkins, 1993)^[11, 5]. In India as well, the British followed two broad patterns of administration- Direct and Indirect. Under Direct rule sovereignty was asserted over the seized territory, virtually excluding indigenous political systems except at the local level whereas under the Indirect rule the British recognized the sovereignty- variously defined at various times- of numerous indigenous rulers, subject to the higher British authority (Fisher, 1998)^[9]. These states which remained under the traditional governance of the native princes, Maharajas, Rajas, Raos, Nawabs, Shiekhs, Thakurs, Rawuls and Desais were called as the native states or princely states or the Indian India. The native states consisted of the territory in India not being within his majesty's dominions yet under his suzerainty (Frowde, 1909)^[10]. The area outside direct British dominion

was enormous (more than 8 lakh 24 thousand square miles, 693 in number) (Frowde, 1909)^[10], however, even being a large part of British Indian Empire the princely states have remained on the margins of the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism (Ramusack, 2004)^[18]. It is only very recently that some progress has been made with regard to exploring the issues prevailing in the princely states in the time of the empire and also the political, economic, socio-cultural and other ramifications that came to the fore with the lapse of British Paramountcy in 1947.

Why British followed this pattern of rule has been matter of serious investigation and different political, economic and administrative explanations have been offered to underline the philosophy behind this unique, at least in Indian context, pattern of rule. Michel Fisher argues that indirect rule had number of benefits for the British, foremost among them being the reduced cost to the colonial administration in the terms of both civil and military budgets and man power, European administrators proved able to extract significant sums from indirectly ruled states for their governments and for themselves- financial benefits did not require direct rule (Fisher, 1998)^[9]. D.A. Low also asserts that British were also mindful that imperial authority was most successfully established wherever it has been able to work within the grain of colonial peoples own notions of legitimacy (Low, 1964)^[14]. Travelers, political agents, viceroys on tour, all testified to the high regard in which the princes were held by their subjects. The British knew they could never win that sort of affection in their own right but they hoped, by associating closely with the princes, to make their rule more *oriental* and therefore more palatable to the illiterate masses with whom such things counted as much as administrative efficiency (Copland, 1982)^[6]. Thus by letting indigenous authority structures carry on much of the administration shielded Europeans from the potential hostility of the local population (Fisher, 1998)^[9]. One

more reason for letting the indigenous rulers to continue was the need for a collaborative class. A crucial argument of the Cambridge school of historiography is that “colonialism depended crucially on collaboration”. Collaborative bargains were not only inherent in the imperial relationship, but the nature of these bargains determined the character and the longevity of the colonial rule (Howe, 2010). So, by this institution of the indirect rule, British gained much needed collaborative class which later on acted as the bulwark of the Raj and helped in the longevity of the British rule in India. The revolt of 1857 further convinced the British of the relative benefits of Indirect rule, leading up to 1857, the British deposed a number of Indian rulers and replaced them with direct British rule. In the hostilities of 1857, these deposed rulers formed much of the leadership of the anti-British forces (Fisher, 1998) ^[9]. It is to be noted that during the revolt the states acquired the reputation as the break waters in the storm and were feted as saviors of the Raj (Copland, 1982) ^[6]. Indirect rule had another advantage for the colonial state. Not only did it help them to effectively deal with the upsurge of nationalism in British India by halting its march but it also provided them the fertile ground to devise a counter narrative against it. Even for the indigenous rulers, indirect rule had one obvious attractive feature in contrast with direct rule. Under indirect rule the ruler retained the throne, direct rule meant deposition and/or exile. British Imperialists believed that indirect rule would make the empire eternal. Thus, from the above mentioned reasons it becomes clear that why British left some indigenous rulers to rule over their states.

It is to be mentioned that these states did not enjoy an independent status ^[1]. The relations between princely states and British was defined by Paramountcy wherein the British restrained the external sovereignty of the princely authorities especially in defense, external affairs and communication leaving the princes as autonomous rulers exercising substantial authority and power within their states (Ramusack, 2004) ^[18]. Along with that the paramount power had assumed the fiduciary responsibility for the general soundness of the princely states administration (Aitchison, 1909). They had asserted from time to time the right to intervene in cases of misrule. But according to Barbara Ramusack British intervention in princely states was guided by political imperatives, intellectual constructs and Indian responses (Ramusack, 2004) ^[18]. That means even by keeping some states under indirect rule British had kept the option of Intervention open for fulfilling its varied interests. The creation of Jammu and Kashmir State by British has to be seen in this larger context.

2. Jammu and Kashmir

The state of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence on the 16th of March, 1846 as a result of the *Treaty of Amritsar* ^[2], an

¹ Dalhousie's Minute, Dated 9 Nov. 1850. For further details see, Sir William Barten, *The Princes of India*, London, 1934.

² To quote Article 1 of the Treaty, ‘the British government transfers and makes over forever, in independent possession, to Maharaja Gulab Singh and his heirs male of his body, all the hilly or mountainous country with its dependencies situated to the east ward of the river Indus and Westward of the river Ravi, including Chamba and excluding Lahol, being part of the territories ceded to the British Government by the Lahore state according to the provisions of Article IV of the treaty of Lahore dated 9th March, 1846 A. D. For full text of the treaty, See, Balraj Puri, *Triumph and Tragedy of Indian Federalization*, Appendix A (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1981.)

offshoot of the *Treaty of Lahore* ^[3], signed between British East India Company and Raja Gulab Singh. Disparate territories Viz. Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Hunza, Nagar and Gilgit stripped by the company from the Sikh kingdom of Punjab were cobbled together to bring into being this state (Rai, 2004) ^[17]. It would not be out of place to mention that through the Treaty of Lahore, the Maharaja of Punjab had agreed to recognize the independent sovereignty of Raja Gulab Singh in such territories and districts in the hills as may be made over to him by separate agreement with the British Government. The separate agreement came in the form of the Treaty of Amritsar on 16th March, 1846, hereafter Gulab Singh was bestowed with the title of Maharaja- an emblem of sovereignty (Cunnigham, 1966) ^[7].

Creating a new state of Jammu and Kashmir and giving its possession to Raja Gulab Singh was the result of a myriad set of factors ranging from geo-strategic and political considerations to administrative and economic compulsions of the empire all of them however in complete consonance with the overall philosophy of the pattern of British rule in India.

After the death of Maharaja Ranajit Singh, the builder of the powerful Sikh kingdom, in 1839, the court in Lahore spiraled into a period of factional infighting. The English East India Company viewed with concern the growing political confusion at the Sikh court, not only could such instability endanger the delicate frontier between India and Afghanistan but the company felt the threat particularly keenly in the context of its balance of power strategies against the ever loaming threat of Russian advance (Bylay, 1993) ^[3]. This was the signal for the British to intervene in Punjab and led, in 1845 to the first Anglo-Sikh war. When the Sikhs were finally defeated at the battle of Sobraon on 10th Feb. 1846, the British victory proved pyrrhic. The East India Company realized quickly that a complete subsumption of the Sikh kingdom required greater military thrust and more abundant financial resources than it could then muster (Hardinge, 1891) ^[12]. So British pursued the more limited aim of maintaining the Sikh kingdom but under their firm supervision and in considerably diminished form. The most expedient way of achieving the later goal was by breaking up the territorial integrity of Ranajit Singh's dominions. Accordingly some territories of Sikh empire were transferred to Gulab Singh, this also aimed at driving a permanent wedge between the Lahore Darbar and the Dogra Rajputs of the hills (Singh, 1963). This is substantiated by the Governor General's despatch to the Secret Committee; dated 19th March, 1846, number 8, NAI, which reads as under:

³ Article 12 of the Treaty of Lahore reads, ‘In consideration of the services rendered by Raja Golab Singh, of Jammoo, to the Lahore state, towards procuring the restoration of the relations of amity between the Lahore and the British Governments the Maharaja hereby agrees to recognize the independent sovereignty of Raja Golab Singh in such territories and districts in the hills as may be made over to the said Raja Golab Singh, by separate Agreement between himself and the British Government, with the dependencies thereof, which may have been in Rajah's possession since the time of the late Maharajah Khurrack Singh, and the British Government, in consideration of the good conduct of Raja Golab Singh also agrees to recognize his independence in such territories, and to admit him to the privileges of a separate Treaty with the British Government. C. U. Aitchison, (ed.), *A collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads: Relating to India and the Neighbouring countries* (Nendelen, 1973) Krauss rep., Vol. 1, pp. 50-54.

“... as it was of the utmost importance to weaken the Sikh Nation before its Government should be re-established. I consider the appropriation of this part of the ceded territory to be the most expedient measure. I could devise for that purpose by which a Rajput dynasty will act as a counterpoise against the power of a Sikh Prince, the son of late Ranjit Singh”.

Moreover, the British expected the state of Jammu and Kashmir along with what remained of the Sikh kingdom to act as a bulwark against the Afghans and prevent them from making their power felt or from extending their influence to this side of the Indus. The same despatch also reads:

“... both Sikhs and Dogra Rajputs will have a common interest in resisting attempts on the part of any Mohammedan power to establish an independent state on this side of Indus or even to occupy Peshawar”.

Thus it is clear that the creation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir was guided by the imperial interest of considerably weakening a formidable enemy state of Punjab together with creating a buffer zone between the unruly Afghans and the Pax Britannica. Nevertheless, it was presumed that this politico-territorial surgery would ensure the frontier defense of the empire by transferring a greater part of the responsibility to Gulab Singh.

The British policy of transferring territories to Gulab Singh and exercising indirect control over him has off late been attacked as a foolish and short sighted policy (Pannikar, 1930) ^[16]. In fact many British people felt that Kashmir had been lost to them after providence had placed it in their charge. Margaret Cotter Morison, British visitor to Srinagar, writes “ the action of the English in parting with Kashmir has been a good deal criticized both at the time and since, for it was asked: What had the Raja of Jammu (Gulab Singh) done for us that his territory should be thus largely increased” (Morison, 1904) ^[15].

However looking at the formation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the overall context of the British rule in India and its philosophy of administration it is amply clear that the creation of the state was in complete agreement with the dominant imperial discourse of governance with ease and minimal cost. Here it is worth mentioning that British did not establish their direct rule all over India but preferred to keep some areas under indirect rule for varied interests. Hence placing the state of J & K under Gulab Singh was the established practice of the British rather than a break from their tradition. The choice depended on many factors. The British let those native states to remain which did not pose a serious military threat to the hegemony of the Raj; that had little to offer in the way of natural resources; those situated in remote corners or on hostile terrains and would, if annexed, have feared a strain on an already overburdened exchequer (Elphinstone, 1978) ^[8]. The letter from Governor General to the Secret Committee dated 14th March, 1846 reads:

“it is not my intention to take possession of the whole of this territory. Its occupation by us would be on many accounts disadvantageous. It would bring us into collision with many powerful chiefs, for whose coercion a large military establishment at a great distance from our provinces and military resources would be necessary. It would more than double the extent of our present frontier in countries assailable at every point, and most difficult to defend without any corresponding advantages for such large addition of territory. Now, distant and conflicting interests would be created and races of people, with whom we have hitherto had no

intercourse, would be brought under our ruler, while the territories, excepting Kashmir, are comparatively unproductive, and would scarcely pay the expenses of occupation and management”.

The British concerns of ruling the state of Jammu and Kashmir directly were also voiced by Lord Hardinge. Hardinge wrote that “the distance from Kashmir to Sutlej (their base) is 300 miles of very difficult mountainous country, quite impracticable for six months. To keep a British force 300 miles from any possibility of support would have an undertaking that merited a strait waist coat and not a peerage” (Hardinge, 1891) ^[12].

The transfer of territories to Gulab Singh should also be seen as an attempt on part of the British to have a sound and energetic collaborator in the northern frontier. It was perhaps for the same reason that The Times (London) termed the treaty of Amritsar as the most striking feature in the whole process of things that unfolded with the Anglo-Sikh confrontation. The Newspaper emphasized “ As an enemy his power of attack, with the divided forces of an irregular army, would have proved intolerably injurious; as a friend we may hope to find in him a steady adherent of that qualified British ascendancy to which he owes his rise” (The Times, 1846) ^[22].

Apart from this the imperial interests of the British could have been easily fulfilled even after keeping these territories under indirect rule, as these states were not independent and British had the power to interfere in these areas in case of misrule. The position of the Maharaja Gulab Singh vis-a-vis the colonial state can be gauged from the fact that on the occasion of the signing of the treaty of Amritsar he stood up, and with joined hands, expressed his gratitude to the British Viceroy – adding, without however any ironical meaning, that he was indeed his *Zurkharid* or gold boughten Slave (Cunningham, 1966) ^[7].

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