

**RANJIT SINGH'S KASHMIR EXTENSIONISM
AND BRITAIN'S ROLE**

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Abstract

Kashmir, one of the most blessed spots upon the earth, remained under the auspices of different dynasties from BC to AD 1947. The powerful Sikh Ruler of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, occupied it with the support of the British, the Dogras and the Kashmiri Pandits. The centuries old Muslim Rule on Kashmir came to an end with Ranjit's occupation. The imposition of non-Muslim Rule brought miseries, indignities, economic, political and religious persecution. His representatives in Kashmir also pursued the policy of unbounded repression and corruption with the active support of him. This article deals with the Ranjit's rule on Kashmir.

Keywords:

Shah Mir, Kota Rani, Mughal Empire, Pandit Birbal Dhar, Gujranwala, Sukerchakia, Punjab, The British, Marhattas, Muslim, Ranjit Singh.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir has a rich history spread over a period of more than five thousand years preserved in written form. Asoka, Kanishka and Lalitaditya were the most conspicuous figures of the Hindu dynasty. They raised their country to the height of glory it had never reached before.(1) After them, the history of Kashmir sinks into a long tale of court intrigue with one weak king succeeding another, until the centuries of Hindu Rule came to an end in AD. 1323, when Renchan Shah, a Tibetan by birth and an adventurer at the court, raised a successful rebellion and usurped the throne.(2)

After him, Shah Mir, a Muslim, deposed Kota Rani and founded a Muslim dynasty. That was the first regular Muslim dynasty of Kashmir. This dynasty produced very famous conquerors, administrators and poets like Shihab-ud-Din, Zain-ul-Abidin and Yusuf Shah. They were the shining stars of Shahmiri dynasty.(3) The Chaks succeeded the Shahmiris. Their period was notorious for religious fanaticism, wanton barbarity, insecurity and ruthlessness.(4) In 1586, Kashmir became a province of the Mughal empire and the chapter of its long independent status came to close.(5) After the decay of the Mughal empire, Kashmir fell once again into wild disorder and eventually came under the oppressive rule of the Afghans in 1752. That was the darkest period of Kashmir history. The powerful Sikh ruler of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, attacked three times on Kashmir in 1813, 1814 and 1819 respectively. He got permission in advance from the British to attack on Kashmir and in the last attack, with the support of British, Dogras and Kashmiri Pandits (*particularly Pandit Birbal Dhar*) he occupied Kashmir.(6) After the decline of Sikh Rule, the British became the master of Kashmir and in 1846, they sold Kashmir and surrounding hill territories to Maharaja of Jammu, Gulab Singh through a sale deal. The Dogra dynasty ruled Kashmir till 1947.

Ranjit Singh Sukerchakia was a man who liquidated the warring misls, nurtured the consciousness of regional nationalism to forge a unified kingdom and harnessed the restless energy of the Punjabis to conquer neighbouring countries. He was born in Gujranwala on November 13, 1780.(7) He was twelve years old when his father died. He did not receive any formal education. A sudden change came into him when he reached the age of fifteen and assumed control of the Sukerchakia estates and got married. The marriage brought him under the influence of his mother-in-law, Sada Kaur, who was the head of the Kanhayas.(8) She more than anyone else directed his unbounded energy towards unifying the Punjab.

When Ranjit Singh consolidated his position in the Punjab, he subdued several chieftains who did not voluntarily acknowledge his supremacy. Now he had his eyes fixed on the Jammu and Kashmir State. There were few reasons of choosing Kashmir. The British were fairly-well entrenched towards the South of Ranjit's kingdom. He had already seen the fate of Bengal, Mysore, Hyderabad, the Marhattas and scores of other kingdoms which had one by one, through conflict with the Britishers, been wiped out. Therefore, he did not want to risk a war with them.(9) The Afghans were towards the north of his kingdom. Ranjit Singh had already captured Peshawar and its adjoining areas. It had cost him considerably in men, money and material. He thought further military activity on this side would be a highly expensive adventure, apart from being uncertain of the result.(10)

Now the only territory was Jammu and Kashmir for quenching his thirst for conquest. Therefore, Ranjit Singh sought an assurance from the British that they would not stand in the way of its subjugation. The British had their own interests. They were afraid of Czarist expansion. They apprehended Russo-Afghan collaboration for an invasion of India. So, it was in the interest of the British to strengthen Ranjit Singh and his dominion. Thus Ranjit Singh's strong dominion could act as a buffer between the British and the Afghans.(11) These were the reasons of Ranjit Singh's attack on Kashmir.

Ranjit Singh's life ambition was to visit the valley. The depth of his longing may be imagined from the following letter sent to the Kashmir Governor, Col. Mihan Singh:

Would that, I could only once in my life enjoy the delight of wandering through the gardens of Kashmir, fragrant with almond-blossoms, and sitting on the fresh green turf. (12)

Unfortunately, his longing was destined to remain unrealized. Ranjit Singh attacked three times on Kashmir and he got permission in advance from the British to occupy Kashmir. The Muslim government (1339 –1819) of Kashmir had been wiped out by the conspiracy of the British, Kashmiri Pandits and Dogras. A plan was designed in 1812, on the occasion of the marriage of Kharak Singh, to abolish five hundred years Muslim Rule of Kashmir. Ranjit Singh invited the Governor-General, the Commander-in-Chief and other British officers to attend the marriage ceremony of Kharak Singh in 1812. The Governor-General did not attend the marriage ceremony. He sent his

representative Col. Ochterlony to attend the ceremony. It was during these festivities which provided an ideal cover for serious talks without raising any suspicions around that the British gave their approval to a Sikh invasion and annexation of Kashmir.(13) Restoration of Shah Shujah to Kabul throne and Ranjit Singh's occupation of Kashmir was the fundamental British policy. The British were expecting from Ranjit's occupation on Kashmir, deliverance of Shah Shujah from imprisonment and abolition of Muslim government from Kashmir.

Ranjit Singh attacked on Kashmir in 1813 after the approval of the British in 1812, for quenching his thirst for conquest with the collaboration of the Afghans. But failed in his first attempt. He made second attempt in 1814, with heavy machinery and force to occupy Kashmir. Ranjit Singh was very hopeful this time. But he again failed in his second attempt. The news of Ranjit's defeat in Kashmir despite his military superiority, have spread like a wild-fire throughout north India and considerably damaged his image. Col. Ochterlony had been already noticed as representing the Governor-General at the marriage of prince Kharak Singh, sent a letter, offering British military assistance for a new invasion. But Ranjit Singh was still confident of his ability to achieve the objective with his own resources. He thankfully declined the offer.(14)

The second defeat shocked Ranjit Singh but could not deter him from pursuing his cherished goal. His standing army was second only to the British in Sub-continent.(15) Ranjit Singh was a man of resolute will. He possessed stirring qualities of leadership. He learnt an important lesson from the failure of Kashmir and changed his policy of conquering Kashmir. He understood soon that soldiers drawn from plains could not handle a war at high altitudes. Therefore, he entrusted Dina Nath (*Revenue and Finance Minister*) and Ganga Ram (*both Kashmiri Pandits*) with the task of army administration and the purchase of administration for the third invasion on Kashmir. (16) Both the Pandits were Kashmiri natives and understood the tactics of hilly areas. Secondly, Ranjit Singh occupied hill states of Nurpur, Jaswan and Kangra. The purpose of these conquests was that the Afghans could not support the Kashmir's Muslim government.(17) The Gurkhas also played a vital role in the third attempt on Kashmir. It was a coincidence that by about same time (*in third attempt*) Nepal was over-run by the British and large number of Gurkhas scanned through the sub-continent for employment. Thousands made almost straight for the Punjab of Ranjit's fame. Ranjit Singh lost no time in

raising a sizeable force from amongst them with the immediate object of using them in his prospective invasion of Kashmir. (18)

The group of Kashmiri Pandits wanted to abolish the Muslim government of Kashmir. During Afghan era (1752 - 1819) many Kashmiri Pandits were appointed on important administrative posts. Among them in 1819, Pandit Birbal Dhar, Mirza Pandit Dhar and Sukha Ram Safaya were appointed on responsible administrative posts. Pandit Birbal Dhar embezzled in government's revenue and escaped in the darkness of the night towards Punjab along with his son Raj Kak. Mirza Pandit also supported him to go to Punjab and induce Ranjit Singh to conquer Kashmir. (19)

The Dogras of Jammu and Pandits of Kashmir had strengthened the hands of Ranjit Singh. In 1819, Azim Khan, a prestigious soldier, went to Afghanistan for the support of his brother, Fateh Mohammad. He put his younger brother, Jabbar Khan, incharge of Kashmir, with the remainder of the troops to maintain the arrangement till he hoped to return back.(20) When Ranjit Singh received the news that Azim Khan went Kabul to engage in a fratricidal war and had left a small force behind. He got ready for the third attempt to avenge his defeat and realised his long cherished desire to annex the beautiful valley of Kashmir to his kingdom. It was an unequal contest between the Afghan horses on the one hand and the Sikh guns on the other. This war continued for a few hours and Kashmiri army lost the field. The Sikh army which is estimated at thirty thousand entered Srinagar on the 4th of July 1819.(21) Troops were dispatched to different parts to overcome the resistance put up by the local people. The Muslims of Kashmir valley were not pleased with the Afghan Rule (1752 - 1819) in Kashmir. The Afghan rulers had dealt with them as harshly as with the local Hindus. The only exception they (*Muslims of valley*) enjoyed was religious freedom. Therefore, they made a common cause with the Afghans to prevent the passage of their territory into Sikh hands. They wanted that centuries old Muslim rule should remain intact in Kashmir. Otherwise the imposition of Hindu Rule would bring ruins, miseries, indignities, as well as economic, political and religious persecution.

Ranjit Singh occupied Kashmir in his last attempt in 1819, with the support of the Dogras, Kashmiri Pandits and Gurkhas. The Sikh Rule lasted for twenty seven years only and came to an end with the signing of the infamous treaty of Amritsar. After capturing Kashmir, Ranjit Singh appointed his representatives in the valley. Disorder was created in the valley by the Sikh soldiers. The pursuit of

loot took the Sikh soldiers to farthest corners of the valley. It looked as if hordes of hungry vultures had descended upon the land. During the Sikh Rule, economic system had wiped out. Heavy taxes were levied. Famous industries of Kashmir had been seized to work. Agricultural system of Kashmir had damaged. Moorcroft, the British traveller visited the valley during the second period of governor Moti Ram. He describes the economic condition of the Kashmiries. Butchers, bakers, boatmen, vendors of fuel, public notaries, scavengers and prostitutes, all paid a tax.(22) The effect of this oppressive taxation, as may be apprehended, was the impoverishment of the people and consequently large number of them fled from the country. The trade of Kashmir was ruined. The heavy taxation of the shawl trade had very undesirable effect on the treatment of labourers by the capitalists, and in a large measure was responsible for the decay of this important industry.(23)

The Sikh governors of Kashmir were pursuing the policy of unbounded repression and corruption with the active support of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He assuredly well-knew that the greater the prosperity of Kashmir, the stronger would be the inducement to invasion by the East India Company. Most assuredly its ruin had been accelerated, not less by his rapacity than by his political jealousy, which suggested to him, at any cost, the merciless removal of its wealth and the reckless havoc which he had made in its resources.(24)

By the end of Sikh Rule the people were thoroughly demoralized. All their old glory, grandeur and heroism had vanished. The religious condition of valley was unutterable during Sikh period. Many mosques and shrines were locked up. Cow slaughter, prevalent for centuries, was declared a crime punishable by death, and Muslims were actually hanged, dragged through the city of Srinagr, and even burnt alive for having slaughter cattle.(25) There is no any achievement of a positive character to be set the credit of the Sikh Rule in Kashmir, except a small fort at Uri and another one at Narochhi, near Muzaffarabad built by Hari Singh Nalwa, and the construction of the Gurdwara at Matan, Baramula and outside the Kathi Darwaza, Srinagar by Col. Mihan Singh. (26)

The advantage of good personal rule is that the people are able to take their grievances against officials direct to the ruler. It is the duty of the ruler to punish the wrong-doing officials. But with the Sikhs it was quite the reverse. Ranjit Singh made money even out of these complaints of misgovernment, rapacity and plunder. Many

governors of Kashmir, who were corrupt, had a lot of complaints against them, were restored to their status.

The result of such a policy may well be imagined. A governor who knows by the example set by a predecessor that however cruel or corrupt he might be, he can remain unharmed if he can spare a part of his loot for Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This is one of the reasons why the Sikh Rule is the most hated one in the annals of Kashmir.

A famous verse of those days attributed to Mullah Hamidullah is:

شامت اعمال چون دامنگير شد
قوم سگهان وارد کشمير شد

*It was the retribution of our sins that the
Sikhs entered Kashmir.*

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