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FOUNDATION OF SIKH EMPIRE: ROLE OF GULAB SINGH AND IMPERIAL BRITISH EMPIRE

Abstract

The foundation of Punjab State historically referred to the Sikh Empire or Lahore Darbar because it is linked with unification of Sikh Misls located in the territories of Punjab during 1795-1808. This region was unified by Ranjit Singh after annexation of all misls and extended towards north and west. From Peshawar to Tibet and Sindh to Xinjiang, the Empire of Gulab Singh was extended in the light of Treaty of Amritsar of 1809 (Treaty of Friendship & Peace) between East India Company and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This Treaty was a certificate by British Government of India to Maharaja Ranjit Singh to extend towards north and northern south from Tibet towards Kabul and Gilgit. The Imperial Rule forfeited the claim to the Cis-Sutlej State and Company ensured not to interfere in northern extension of Lahore Darbar. This study is analytical approach towards the exploration of British ambitions in expansion and annexation of Sikh or Punjab Empire. The strategic interests of British Indian Empire as securing the Imperial rule, British Policy towards north against Russia and the contribution of Ranjit Singh are the prime themes of this study. This study also aimed to explore the role of Gulab Singh in annexation of Lahore Darbar to British Imperial rule that how he assisted British in grabbing the Punjab and British assisted him in foundation of Dogra Rule in Kashmir.

Key words: *Geostrategic, Geographic, international Politics, Regional Hegemony, Russia, British, Gulab Singh*

The region of Punjab is currently divided in Pakistan and India through Redcliffe Award of July 1947.¹ The foundation of Sikh States was traced in the pages of history during 1707 just after the death of Aurangzeb in the consequences of a series of downfall of Mughal Empire in Subcontinent. The leading character in the foundation of small Sikh States in Punjab with latterly named as misls, was Guru Gobind Singh who led Punjabi expeditions against Afghan brutal. In the region of Punjab, during 18th century, there were twelve Sikh Misls: Phulkain, Ahluwalia, Bhangi, Kanhaiya, Ramgargia, Singhpuria, Panjgarhia, Nishanvali, Sukerchakia, Dallewalia, Nakai and Shaheedanmisls² who were sovereign states having their own flags armies. They all collectively fought wars against Afghans and Mughals initially and formed joint military by naming it, ‘Khalsa Dal’. In the last three decades of 18th century, intra-mislas wars started and in the period of nearly one hundred years from 1745 to 1849, these Sikh fought about 60 wars against Afghans, Mughals and among one another.

While on the western side of Punjab, the son of the Raja of Gujranwala, Ranjit Singh was supported by the East India Company and allowed by swallow the above-mentioned states and unifying into Ranjit Singh Empire from 1798. After the second Anglo-Maratha War, British used the diplomatic annexation

¹Moon, Blake, D., and Ashton, S. The Transfer of Power, 1942-7: Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: Volume XI: The Mountbatten Viceroyalty Announcement and Reception of the 3rd June Plan 31 May- 7 July 1947.

²Francklin, William (1805). Military memoirs of Mr. George Thomas, who, by extraordinary talents and enterprise, rose from an obscure situation to the rank of a general, in the service of the native powers in the North-West of India. Reprinted for John Stockdale. p. 107

instead of directly going into the wars. They acknowledged the advancement of Ranjit Singh forces and pushed the Afghans from Punjab beyond the Attock River. A treaty of friendship & peace and mutual support was signed between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and East India Company at Amritsar on 25th April 1809 between T. Metcalfe representing East India Company and Maharaja Ranjit Singh as the head of Sikh Kingdom of Punjab.³ This treaty was the after-shoots of Czars and Napoleon agreement of intra continental collaboration for joint military adventures.

After this treaty, Maharaja Ranjit Singh encouraged and continuously extending his territories towards north and northern west. His army officers Zorawar Singh and Gulab Singh pushed Afghan from all the parts of Punjab and evacuated from Kashmir in 1819, Hazara in 1838 and Peshawar was the boundary of the Sikh Empire. In 1841, British wrote a note to him to restrict his commander Gulab Singh and withdrew his advancement in Lhasa. Hari Singh Nalwa, his most prominent commander annexed the Kasur, Sialkot, Multan, Kashmir, Attock and Peshawar from 1825 to 1840. He further secured Koh-i-Noor diamond and extended the British Empire to the Khyber Pass and then moved towards northern areas, Chitral, Chillas, Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar. According to the demography of Sikh Empire or Punjab State or Lahore Darbar, as mentioning Duggal that there were Muslim majority about 80% and Sikhs were 10-12%⁴ but in the

³Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Treaty of Amritsar". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 18 Apr. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Amritsar>. Accessed 3 April 2022.

⁴Kartar Singh Duggal (2001). *Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Last to Lay Arms*. Abhinav Publications. p. 55.

retrospectively narration of census of 1881 the demographical realities of Punjab was 51% Muslims, 40% Hindus and around 8% Sikhs.⁵

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh British launch more strategic moves as Afghanistan was formally declared the Buffer zone to restrict Czars and got assurance from Russia not to extend towards Subcontinent, would remain limited to actual line of control beyond the Omo Oxus River. So, British sat together for the annexation of Lahore Darbar into British Imperial rule. The opportunity was provided by accidental deaths of Ranjit Singh's heirs which is overviewed by some researchers and analysts that the accidental deaths of the heirs of Ranjit Singh was a ruthless conspiracy which not only weakened Lahore Darbar but badly resulted into administrative failure.

When the British annexed Punjab in 1849, the empire exposed itself to a unique challenge. The harsh topography of the western doabs and the dangerous political situation of the province made Punjab a difficult region to control and govern. In the formative years of British rule in the province, Punjab was just recovering from a century of turbulence. The political vacuum left by the collapse of Mughal Empire gave way to a long period of infighting between various indigenous tribes that resulted in the establishment of a number of petty princely states. Later, the British conquered Punjab through one of these princely states. Ranjit Singh's Lahore became the British gateway into Punjab. Control was gained throughout the province through co-opting the

⁵Singh, Amarinder (2010). *The Last Sunset: The Rise and Fall of the Lahore Durbar*. Roli Books. p. 23.

ruling elite of Punjab. The British were quick to earn the loyalty of most of the ruling groups by entering into a partnership with them. The erstwhile sovereign of the land was to now serve as an intermediary between the colonial state and people. The alliance consolidated when the Punjabis helped the British during the tumultuous years of the War of Independence of 1857.⁶ During these catastrophic years, Punjab became a source of stability for the British. The Punjabi elites proved their loyalty to the colonial rulers by providing the soldiers necessary to regain British control over India.

The rise of Sikh Empire impacted worst upon Afghan rule which began defragmentation from Kashmir to Kabul soon after the death of Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1773. The Afghan rule was disintegrated from the Punjab towards north and east as Sindh was announced independence in 1790 by Talpurs. Soon after Ranjit Singh started carving the Sikh Empire by the procedure of unification of misls and joining military confederacies. Some of them, initially declared their independence as well but merged in Sikh Empire later.

In these circumstances, Gulab Singh was born when his forefathers lost their dynasty in 1792. The region of Jammu was simultaneously arisen in the pages of history during the youth of Gulab Singh and special consideration of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and debate was started from where these Dogras were arrived and what was their family tree. It is narrated by anonymous historian that Dogras regained ancestors their worth and honour through

⁶Mark Condos. 2017. *The Insecurity State Punjab and the Making Colonial Power in British India*. Cambridge University Press. P. 23-45.

Zorawar Singh who formed mini states Dymann and Andarwa. BawaSatindar Singh showed prospects that Gulab, Dhian and Sucheet were born in Andarwa.⁷

Most of the historian were identifying the relationship of three Dogra brothers with Ranjit Dev. It also stated that these were merely means squire or dependent of Jammu King.⁸ Vigne claimed them detested by the lovers of legitimacy, Cunningham described them illegitimate.⁹ In all above prospects nothing found which could be lent credence to the target discussion. The best work has done by Cunningham who explored own genealogical table of family tree of Ranjit Dev and his brother Surat Singh. So, in this detail elaboration, Gulab Singh was the latter direct descendants and declared them bona fide members of ruler family.¹⁰ Gulab Singh was familiar with nick name Goolanloo,¹¹ was had a deep greed to reoccupy those lands and regain power and rule which was lost by his foregatherers. He was totally illiterate and had no formal education but he had chosen the way of warrior and learn the administrative and commanding skills.

Soon he accomplished the courses and training of horse riding to become a skillful horse man and most talented in the use of sword and gun while his eldest members indoctrinated and relied on him for yearning to reaffirm the rule and made power

⁷Singh, Bawa S. *The Jammu Fox: A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir, 1792-1857*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. pp. 72-142.

⁸Singh, Mohinder. *The History of Punjab*. London. Penguin Books. pp. 2-202

⁹Cunningham, Joseph Davey. *A History of the Sikhs, from the Origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*. London: J. Murray. 1849. P. 189.

¹⁰*Ibid.* Appendix xxv

¹¹ Edwin Arnold. *The Marquis of Dalhousie's Administration of British India*. London. 1862. pp. 1-33

paradigm shift toward Dogra family for the establishment of Dogra Kingdom for regional hegemony and supremacy. To achieve this goal, Gulab Singh was started a journey first towards Kabul and later down settled in Mangla Fort on less than half dozen rupees per month.

H. Edwardes, believed the Gulab Singh's physique and poise produced extraordinary attraction and charm to Maharaja in his scripts, “[Gulab Singh] was a remarkably fine and powerfully made man, with a handsome face, and a head of hair and beard like a lion, and as black as the plumage of Raven.....Runjeet contemplated him with delight. He was just the stuff of which a conqueror makes up his army”.¹²

Few historian believed that the induction of Gulab Singh was the pledge which was made by Ranjit Singh's father Mahan Singh was made a will at the time his death to present consideration to Mian Mota or his descendants.¹³ In all these circumstance Gordon explored that the Maharaja purposely inducted the antimuslimism elements like Dogra to oppose the Muslims resistance in Hazara and Afghani territories in Peshawar to Multan.¹⁴ Besides of all this debate, Gulab Singh proved himself as dedicated, honest, stable, strong firmness and loyal to Ranjit Singh because he wanted to win his trust to regain the territories of Jammu. It is further argued that there were some major traits

¹² Edwardes Herbert. *Memorials of the Life and Letters of Sir Herbert B. Edwardes*. Paul, Trench, 1886.pp. 67-68

¹³ Lal, Ganeshi Lala. *Siyahat-i-Kashmir (Kashmir Nama Or Tarikh-i-Kashmir) Being an Account of a Journey to Kashmir*, Issue 4 of Punjab. Government Record Office. Publications. Controller of Print. and Stationery, Punjab. 1955 P. 39

¹⁴ Gordon, John H. *The Sikhs*. William Blackwood and Sons, London. 1904. p. 101

plentifully established on multiple excursions forwarded Maharaja Ranjit Singh to extend the Sikh Kingdom towards northern boundaries. Ranjit Singh's dependency was started from the expedition of 1913 against the Afghans which made prominence of Gulab Singh and turned into carved mutual trust, interdependency and initiative of long favours in type of Jagirs in the neighbouring areas of Jammu. As after the revolt from Hazara Gulab Singh crushed them as he cut down the rebel leader into the pieces and his body-limb was suspended on Shisham tree to teach the lesson to common public.¹⁵

Gulab Singh further extended his arms with swords in 1818 when he participated in Multan invasion in 1819, went on ride against Afghans in Kashmir and in this war three Jammu brothers were participated with deception rather than courage, singularized him. This was the chainn of granting Jagir to Gulab Singh soon the land of Taluka was given to Mians (Three Dogras of Jammu) furthermore, they were given a team of cavalry troops to protect the surrounded areas and will work as frontier defence line for Lahore Darbar. They also provided assistance and protection to Kashmir trade route. In return of this jagir, they had to facilitate the caravans who were trading Pashmina and expeditions of religious pilgrims. Initially it was also decided that they would be responsible for reimbursements of the loss to the victims which was happened in any operation, resistance or war. Besides of that main focus was to kill the Mian Dido like rebels and crushing down such provokes and anti-Sikh movements.¹⁶ While Gulab Singh permitted to soother in rebellious areas and smother and fuddle Mian Dido who claimed as direct inheriting Ranjit Dev. Gulab Singh further ambition to clean up potential threats threat to

¹⁵ Lal, Kanihya. *Tareekh-e-Punjab*. Lahore: Majlas-e-Taraqi-e-Adab. 1877. pp. 470-71

¹⁶ *Agreement between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Jammu Family* 15th November, 1820.

Gulab Singh as a direct heir of Ranjit Dev.¹⁷ It was one of the toughest expedition led by Gulab Singh in which he was resisted much by local community in hilly terrains but at the end, one of the Gulab Singh soldier keeping himself on safe distance, shot the dauntless rebel to death.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Maharaja was happily awarded Jammu in Jagir to entire Dogra family.

Gulab Singh was counted as the name of revolt crusher or rebellion soother in Lahore Darbar, so, by taking full-fledged rewards and awards in name of his bravery, loyalty, faithfulness and trust. Gulab Singh who was narrated by Bawa Satinder Singh as the Jammu fox, maneuvered and conspicuously ticked to create dissention between Ranjit Singh, Tegh Singh as well as with Lakhpat Ray also to compose an incrimination node with latterly addressed but that was too late because Ranjit Singh deliberately allowed to fall in the hands of Jammu boys.¹⁹ As an evidence a letter can be presented in which Gulab Singh made multidimensional approaches in reply of the letter from state affairs. He wrote back that he aimfully came here (on expeditions) and would do what would be suitable (to do what must be done) and would latterly inform the department.²⁰ This attitude showed the powers and dedicated command of Ranjit Singh, discovering other scenes, as for an instance, Gulab Singh planned and purposefully seeded chaos in Kishtwar region and anarchy in surrounded areas and succeeded in arresting Raja Tegh Singh, brought back Lahore and was poisoned after some days. On the

¹⁷ Prinsep, Henry T. *Origin of Sikh Power in the Punjab*. India: Calcutta. 1834. P. 125

¹⁸ Ibid P. 485-495

¹⁹ Singh, Bawa S. *The Jammu Fox: A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir, 1792-1857*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974. p. 9

²⁰ Lal, Kanihya. *Tareekh-e-Punjab*. Lahore: Majlas-e-Taraqi-e-Adab. 1877. pp. 450-75

other hand, Lakhpat Ray was forced to work under the supervision of Gulab Singh and he did after few years of resistance. Besides of all praise, admires, glory and trust: Maharaja Ranjit Singh could not grant the supervision of Kashmir in the hands of Gulab Singh, as he knew the potential threat but with all precautions, he was forced against his loyalty and faithfulness to entrust the command of Jammu solely in the hands of Gulab Singh and declared him Raja of Jammu on 4th May 1822 in a very colourful celebration on the Chenab Banks.²¹

Ranjit Singh deliberately and tactically intended to engage Gulab Singh in western parts instead of north and east areas of Kashmir. On the other hand, Gulab Singh was still on his mission as in 1830s, he was granted the supervision of Gujrat and PindDadan Khan. Here, he once again used a dual technical intrigue and shot down two rival in a single bullet fire. In the result of flood in Jhelum River, Gulab Singh wrote a letter to Maharaja Ranjit Singh in humorous manner. The subject of the letter was, “due to excessive and stormy rains, the river Jhelum was flooded the PindDandan Khan which washed out the salt worth of more than 0.6 million rupees. It was negligence of governor of Kashmir who could not controlled Jhelum River extra water which flowed down the melted salt to DiwanSawan Mal administrated territories. So, ordered to both administrators to pay ransom amount equally”. Ranjit Singh decided as per recommendation of Gulab Singh and both of them were found guilty and fined as

²¹Kirpa Ram. and Charak, Sukh Dev Singh. *Gulabnama: a history of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu & Kashmir* / translated from Persian & annotated by Sukhdev Singh Charak; foreword by Karan Singh. Light & Life Publishers New Delhi, 1977. P. 219

well.²²

In all these circumstances Gulab Singh not only worked as warrior who was extending the Sikh empire, keep it soother against rebellions and provokes but also set up good position and prestige for himself as compared to Zorawar Singh, Attariwala, Lakhpat Ray, Diwan Sawan Mal, Tegh Singh as many others. Gulab Singh made these arrangements in bilateral mode, as he occasionally paid obligations and healthy number of nazrana as in 1836, he paid fourteen lacs rupees along with one hundred twenty-five camels.²³

During the encounter with Yousafzai tribe's rebellion, Gulab Singh continued the back strikes leisurely and fortified them when hunger forced them to step down resistance and to find their hearths and homes which were reduced to ashes by the forces of Gulab Singh. In this expedition Gulab Singh dually benefitted as he made happy his master Ranjit Singh and also won the trust of British as he worked for them in Kabul disaster in a rescue force.²⁴ In Poonch revolt, Gulab Singh was remembered as a sign of cruelty in local community till today but it was encounter which made Ranjit Singh too much happy and he opened the mouths of treasure on Gulab Singh. In this revolt hundred of members of local community was killed, Shamsuddin, Mali Khan and Sabz Ali Khan skins were peel off alive. In this massacre thousand of local were mercilessly killed.²⁵

²²Lal, Sohan Laal. *Umdat-ut-Tawareekh. Vol. 02.* Anjman Punjab Publishers. 1845. P. 331

²³Lal, Sohan Laal, *Umdat-ut-Tawareekh. Cit. opt. Vol. 3.* pp. 338-39.

²⁴Gupta, Hari Ram. *The Yousafzai and Sikhs.* In Sarkar Commemorative Volume, Ed. H. R. Gupta. India: Hoshiarpur. 1958.P. 148.

²⁵*Agreement between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Jammu Family* 15th November, 1820.

After the death of Ranjit Singh, Gulab Singh made at a fair distance from Lahore Darbar and made his utmost attention towards Jammu and other neighbouring areas and in these years, he also made good gestures, ties and linkages with British army and officers.

In the context of Amritsar Treaty of 16th March 1846, Harding reported, “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 ‘Zarkhareed’ or gold-boughten slave.”²⁶ So, this treaty was the true realizations of his dreams, but Viceroy of India Lord Harding made a narration to his family, officials and circumstance of government which was much interesting that transfer the possession of Kashmir to Gulab Singh and his heirs was the change his opinion about him. Harding wrote remarkable candid words to his family which were greater disdain instead of praise as he wrote to his sister, “the ablest scoundrel in all Asia”²⁷ and to Emily (wife of Harding), “The man whom I have to deal with, Golab Singh, is the greatest rascal in Asia. Unfortunately, it is necessary to improve his condition, because he did not participate in the war against us & his Territories touching ours, we can protect them without inconvenience & give him a slice of the Sikh Territory which balances his strength in some degree against theirs & as he is a rascal and treat him better than he deserves.”²⁸

Gulab Singh phenomenal rise to power the Raja obviously received the firm backing brothers: Dhian and Sucheet Singh and being the Raja of Jammu, he and his brothers lavishly rewarded by

²⁶ Cunningham, J. D. Opt. cit. p. 332

²⁷ Hardinge to Sarah, Feb. 19, 1846, “PPHH”, box No. 1 of unfiled letters.

²⁸ Hardinge to Emily, March 2nd, 1846. “PPHH”, Vol. 06.

Ranjit Singh and others.²⁹

Another author also sketched the qualities of Gulab Singh in such a tremendous manner, “Goolab Sing is avaricious and cruel by nature, deliberately committing the most horrible atrocities for the purpose of investing his name with a terror that shall keep down all thoughts of resistance to his sway.”³⁰ In Short, the foundation of the Sikh Empire and State of Jammu and Kashmir was founded by two ambitious warriors, who worked hard to maintain rule and acquire power. In all circumstances, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Maharaja Gulab Singh both were aimed and determinant in the foundation of their own rule and power in which they were succeeded.

²⁹ Baba, Satindar Singh. The Jammu Fox. cit. pp.134-56.

³⁰ Panikkar, Kavalam Madhava. Gulab Singh, 1792-1858: Founder of Kashmir. Gulshan Publishers. 1989. pp. 97-123

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