

# British takeover of Gilgit in 1935

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to understand the context in which Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir was forced to lease out Gilgit in 1935 to the British for 60 years. This paper throws light on the chain of events such as Russian expansion after the 1917 Russian Revolution and the formation of the USSR, the Chinese expansion in Kashgar and adjoining territories in alliance with Russians, and the speech of Maharaja Hari Singh at Second Round Table Conference in 1931 in London that made British cautious to adopt aggressive policy towards Maharaja to meet their demand of transferring the control of Gilgit to them. It has also been discovered how rising political consciousness among the Muslims in the state and the fateful event of July 13, 1931, was used as an opportunity by the British to pressurize Maharaja to appoint its officers in the State Council and virtually transfer control of the administration including Gilgit to the British. Moreover, it was Prime Minister M. Calvin of Maharaja who persuaded him and made arrangements for the lease of Gilgit to the British in 1935 for 60 years.

**Keywords:-** Gilgit, British, Maharaja Hari Singh, Russia, Chinese, Round Table conference, Political Department, lease, destabilise.

## INTRODUCTION

Gilgit is known as Gibraltar on land due to its geo-strategic importance. Gilgit became part of Jammu and Kashmir in the year 1860 during the rule of Maharaja Ranbir Singh the son and successor of Maharaja Gulab Singh.<sup>1</sup> Gilgit lies on the northern side of Jammu and Kashmir between the parallel of latitude 35 Degree and 37 Degree and the meridians of longitude 74 Degree and 75 Degree in the southeastern portion of Hindukush range of mountains.<sup>2</sup> With the complete annexation of the Gilgit by the Maharaja Ranbir Singh the frontiers were extended in the north up to Central Asia. Maharaja Ranbir Singh was an important ally of the British Indian Government on the northern frontier so the extension of its northern frontier was viewed with much caution and apprehension. So to remain fully informed about the political events including Russian activities in the northern frontier areas the British Government chose Gilgit as a watch tower and established Gilgit Agency was established in the year 1877.<sup>3</sup> The new Maharaja Pratap Singh was deposed in 1889 but partially restored in 1911 and fully in 1921. This period of power vacuum was well utilized as an opportunity by the British to strengthen their position in Gilgit.<sup>4</sup> Even the entry of civil servants in these districts was strictly regulated and subjected to the permission of Political agents posted at Gilgit. To assert authority the State flag was replaced by Union Jack from the unsettled area.

Assertion of Authority over Gilgit by Maharaja Hari Singh

Maharaja Pratap Singh was succeeded by Maharaja Hari Singh as the new ruler of the State of Jammu and Kashmir on Feb. 25, 1926.<sup>5</sup> The political department of the Government of India had expected that Maharaja Hari Singh would remain a toy in the hands of the British Resident.<sup>6</sup> But the British had developed serious apprehensions regarding the independent nature of the new Maharaja as the latter (Maharaja) had served as a senior member of the council dealing with the foreign affairs. Therefore the Government of India was getting impatient to secure a confidential understanding from Maharaja Hari Singh to accept the advice of the Resident in Kashmir, especially concerning frontier matters. Consequently, on 29 September 1925, J.P. Thompson, the Political Secretary to the Government in the Foreign and Political Department wrote to J.B. Wood, the Resident of Kashmir. It stated as follows:- "It is suggested that because of the importance of Kashmir as a Frontier State it would be desirable to

obtain from the new ruler re-affirmation of old understanding given by His Late Highness i.e., the acceptance of Resident's advice in regard regarding Frontier matter".<sup>7</sup>

However, a sea change was witnessed in the State policy vis-à-vis Gilgit and northern frontier areas. Maharaja Hari Singh as a foreign and political minister during Maharaja Pratap Singh's rule had developed his own opinion regarding the issue of Gilgit.<sup>8</sup> He started taking independent decisions concerning Gilgit and its other adjacent frontier areas and thereby asserting his authority in these strategic areas. Maharaja Hari Singh challenged the British rights in Gilgit by declaring it a state territory ordering state flag ought to fly there along with the Union Jack in the office of the Gilgit Agency, where the Union Jack alone used to hoist until then. Further, he also expressed his desire that Gilgit Agency should be abolished and its administration be restored to the state. The British Political Officer at Gilgit had no alternative but to carry out the instructions of the Maharaja concerning the hoisting of the State flag. These moves on the part of Maharaja were resented by the Political Department of the Government of India and had greatly enraged the British authorities from Delhi to London. This was particularly disturbing to the British who had developed high stakes in Gilgit since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Therefore British became impatient to deal with Maharaja Hari Singh who in their view was unsettling their strategic calculations. Therefore, the Political Department of the Government of India got busy drawing up plans for teaching the young Maharaja a lesson and for regaining full possession of the strategic areas of Gilgit. For this purpose, the British decided to set in motion their age-old policy of Divide and Rule, which had already fetched them good dividends in India.<sup>9</sup>

#### Russian threat

The second most important concern for the British was the fear of the expansion of Russia on the borders of the northwest frontier prompting them to attach more importance to Kashmir. With the rise of the new Socialistic regime in Russia after 1917, the fear of expansion of Russia increased because the new Socialistic Russia aspired to the world revolution. Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution called the British "rapacious extortionist and plunderers" and also gave a call to Indians to rise in revolt against the British. Lenin also made a special appeal to the Muslims of India to overthrow the British. At the same time, Afghanistan asserted independence from the yoke of British supremacy. The Amir of Afghanistan wrote a letter to Lenin in which he expresses his happiness over the success of the Russian Revolution. These developments taking place on the northern frontier were the cause for the British government as the Russians had strengthened their position by taking advantage of these events.<sup>10</sup> While the struggle for ascendancy in Gilgit was raging, Communist Russia started demonstrations of her military power with flights of the aircraft to impress the tribal's.<sup>11</sup>

Observing these developments the Resident in Kashmir took measures to restrict the entry of Bolshevik literature and ideas into Kashmir. Order was passed to keep watch on the communists.<sup>12</sup> The Resident gave all directions to seal the state against getting into contact with political ideas. A close watch was kept on all visitors and directed that the "germs of mischievous political ideas should be immediately nipped in the bud".<sup>13</sup> Maharaja Pratap Singh on his part too tried his best to check the entry of communist ideas and literature in Kashmir by ordering to enforce a complete ban on the formation of associations and societies. Even religious bodies were not allowed to function. Despite all these measures to combat the spread of Communism, political ideas continued to enter the Valley.<sup>14</sup> With the same purpose in view in the year 1927 the Government of India planned the construction of an aircraft landing ground at Chilas for the defense of frontier areas. In this regard, the Resident wrote a letter on 8th Jan 1927 to Maharaja asking him whether he had any objection to the proposal of construction of the landing ground. Further, the Resident explains the reasons to Maharaja for the construction of the landing ground at Gilgit and also conveyed that the cost of such construction would be met by the Government of India. The site selected was 3 and a half miles from the bridge over the Gilgit River. The Maharaja in response conveyed to the Resident that he had no objection to the proposal for the construction of a landing ground.<sup>15</sup>

#### Fear of Chinese expansion

Apart from the traditional Russophobia (Russian threat) dimension involved in the formulation of British frontier policy another new dimension that dominated its frontier policy was the Chinese threat of expansion. In the year 1928, the Chinese Chin-Shu-Jen administration of Sinkiang province started developing some serious apprehensions regarding its conventional enemy i.e. the British. Chinese suspected that the British would capitalize on the seething Muslim discontent in Kashgar to their benefit thereby diminishing Peking's authority. Expecting an invasion from the British side, in the year 1929, the Chinese government dispatched a contingent of 700 soldiers to the main Karakoram watershed up to the Yarkand and Karakash rivers. A permanent post was set up at Shahidulla, the same

place just across the Karakoram pass where Maharaja Ranbir Singh had also stationed a garrison in the year 1864.<sup>16</sup> In Hunza too the British felt their position being challenged. The Chief official of the Kashgar town Tao-yin Ma Shao-wu told the representatives of the Mir of Hunza that if Hunza men accepted themselves to be Chinese citizens, only then they would be allowed to cultivate their lands in Raskam-over which he claimed that the Mir had no rights whatsoever.<sup>17</sup>

These developments taking place in the Sinkiang province of China adjacent to the northern frontier made the British Government watchful regarding its security concerns. First, there was much evidence to suggest that there were disturbing contacts between Moscow and Sheng Shih-ts'ai\* attested by favours bestowed such as the extension of a Soviet Loan to the Sinkiang Government in 1935, Russia's oil and mineral exploration in Sinkiang, Russian military aid to Sheng Shih-ts'ai at the times of urgency, etc. Moreover, it was feared that not only Sinkiang would become a Russian protectorate but it would also facilitate Russia in grabbing Eastern Turkistan. This was enough evidence for the British Government to adopt a forceful frontier policy to protect its interests. So by the middle of 1935, the British Government in London noted that "the Soviets have acquired virtual control of the Province of Sinkiang."<sup>18</sup> Further the Government of India became apprehensive of the infiltration of Russian agents into British India for the spread of communist ideas and literature. Secondly, the British perceived the threat to northern Ladakh from a possible inroad by the Tongans of the Khotan region under Ma Hu-Shan who they feared being pushed by Sheng Shi-ti'ia forces in the event of defeat would in all probability enter northern Ladakh which did not station any British garrison. The absence of any British garrison in Ladakh made it highly vulnerable to Chinese attack.

#### Round Table Conference of 1931

In the year 1930 Maharaja have to proceed to London to attend the second Round table conference to be held next year in 1931. Speaking on the behalf of prince Maharaja pleaded for the position of equality, honour, and freedom for the Indians\*. This stand of Maharaja raising the voice of Indians shocked the British Government of London. Observing, the statement of Maharaja at the conference British government felt that Maharaja had refused to toe their line and shown an Independent bent of mind.

#### Conspiracy of British

The British government in response decided that the time has come to keep Maharaja under his thumb. Moreover, it was the time when the British Empire in India was facing dangers from the expansion of the Soviet Union on the north-western frontier particularly Gilgit. The region of Gilgit had always been an important strategic asset of the British. So the British Government started hatching conspiracies to teach a lesson to Maharaja Hari Singh for his asserting independent nature and obtaining complete control over Gilgit.<sup>19</sup> Thus the occurrence of unpleasant events on the north-west frontiers coupled with the unfriendly attitude of the Maharaja towards British led to them to formulate a plan to destabilise the State internally so that he (Maharaja) may be compelled to transfer the control of Gilgit to British as its importance now has reached all-time high.<sup>20</sup>

The British got convinced that Maharaja no more could be trusted as a dependable ally. Already Maharaja had irked the British Government on many occasions mentioned earlier such as refusing the British Residents access to hunting grounds, turning down a request for some cars from the state Motor Garages, etc. All this was too much for the British Government to ignore it. Therefore Political Department started a full-blown campaign to destabilise the government of Maharaja.<sup>21</sup>

The Political Department of the Government of India "wanted to teach Maharaja a lesson" and thus provided its full support including financial assistance to the All-India Kashmir Muslim Conference (AIKMC) formed in 1928 in Lahore to launch a political agitation against Maharaja.<sup>22</sup> The crucial year of 1931 proved very significant for the Maharaja as the events occurred made the circumstances very difficult to manage which ultimately contributed to the weakening of his grip over Gilgit. In the Reasi district of the Jammu province it was alleged that the Hindu majority had demolished a mosque, restrained the Imam from delivering the usual Friday sermon (the Khutba), and even more troublesome report that pages of the Holy Koran were found discarded in a latrine.<sup>23</sup> When these reports reached Kashmir, the environment was charged in Srinagar. Criticism started pouring from all corners of public life. Massive protests meetings and demonstrations were held.

Mr. Wakefield, the Minister of the Political Department of the state exploited this disaffection as an opportunity by bringing together the isolated Muslims of the two provinces i.e. of Jammu and Kashmir on the same page of the



political struggle against the Dogra rule. The Young Men Muslim Association of Jammu was guided by Wakefield to submit before the Maharaja a list of their grievances and send representatives to Srinagar in this regard. Following the advice of Wakefield, four representatives from Jammu namely Choudhary Ghulam Abbas, Mistri Yaqub Ali, Qazi Gaur Rahman, and Sheikh Abdul Hamid arrived in Srinagar in the last week of June 1931.<sup>24</sup> Thus the Political department achieved an unprecedented success in bringing together the Muslims of both the provinces on the common platform posing a challenge to the authority of Maharaja Hari Singh.

At the same time an unknown figure in Kashmir namely Abdul Qadeer whose antecedents point to the North-Western Frontier region, made a vociferous speech on 21st June 1931, against the rule of Maharaja and justified all means to get rid of the Maharaja's rule at a public gathering organized at Khanqah-e-Mullah by the workers of the Muslim Reading Room Party.<sup>25</sup> He repeated the rumours regarding the persecution of Muslims in Jammu and this had incited the passions. He was appropriately arrested on 25 June 1931.<sup>26</sup> The arrest and trial of Abdul Qadeer issued were strongly raised by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah\*. Qadeer's issue started gaining momentum in Kashmir. Such was the impact of the movement that the venue of his trial proceedings had to be shifted from the Sessions Court to the Srinagar Central Jail.<sup>27</sup> The arrest and trial of Abdul Qadeer issued were strongly raised by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah\*. Qadeer's issue started gaining momentum in Kashmir. Such was the impact of the movement that the venue of his trial proceedings had to be shifted from the Sessions Court to the Srinagar Central Jail.<sup>28</sup> The arrest and trial of Abdul Qadeer issued were strongly raised by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah\*. Qadeer's issue started gaining momentum in Kashmir. Such was the impact of the movement that the venue of his trial proceedings had to be shifted from the Sessions Court to the Srinagar Central Jail.<sup>29</sup>

The British were deeply involved in the whole affair. This became clear when the Resident came with a message from the Viceroy himself stating that there were concerns over the events and the fear that the consequences of the events might spill over to British India. He, therefore, suggested that the circumstances warranted Independent outside assistance for a commission of inquiry of the July 13, 1931 event. The least that he could do, according to the alternative given by the Viceroy, was to appoint a Muslim High Court Judge as its Chairman! But it was unacceptable to Maharaja as the message to his subjects would have been that State High Court was incapable of delivering justice fairly to them.<sup>30</sup> Feeling cornered in the wake of the pressure of the British and Sheikh Abdullah' the Maharaja was persuaded to constitute a commission of Enquiry under a senior British Official of the Political Department, Sir Bertram Glancy.

As already an alarming unholy nexus had been formed between senior minister Wakefield and Muslims Conference leaders. Wakefield was acting as the agent of the British Government in Delhi. The part played by Mr. Wakefield in encouraging the agitation was also highlighted by many other witnesses before the Glancy Enquiry Commission.<sup>31</sup> It was also reported that he was offering all possible clandestine support to the agitators to serve the interests of the Government of India. The Maharaja developed the apprehension that the British would not spare him for his speech of 1931 Second Round table conference which had irked the Government of India and had obscured his credibility as a dependent ally. Thus Mr. Wakefield was sacked and replaced by Sri Hari Kishen Kaul as his new Prime Minister.<sup>32</sup> It was also reported that he was offering all possible clandestine support to the agitators to serve the interests of the Government of India. The Maharaja developed the apprehension that the British would not spare him for his speech at the 1931 Second Round table conference which had irked the Government of India and had obscured his credibility as a dependent ally. Thus Mr. Wakefield was sacked and replaced by Sri Hari Kishen Kaul as his new Prime Minister.<sup>33</sup>

Maharaja had been caught in a difficult juncture and to get out of it he tried to appease the Government of India by deciding to appoint a British as his Prime Minister. Accordingly Lt. Col. E.J.D. Colvin of the Foreign and Political department was appointed as the Prime Minister and three other officers of the Indian Civil Service as the Home, Revenue, and Political Ministers of the State. With these appointments, the suddenness with which communal violence and agitation had erupted vanished. However, the bare truth was that now the Maharaja had himself allowed the effective administrative control of the State to pass on to the representatives of the British.<sup>34</sup> These appointments appeared to be a desperate attempt to ease the animosity caused by the dismissal of Wakefield.<sup>35</sup> Later it was the same Colvin who was instrumental in delivering the cruelest cut of all when Maharaja was persuaded to lease out Gilgit to British.<sup>36</sup>

On one hand, the British Political Department was deeply involved in destabilizing Maharaja's authority in Kashmir, and on the other hand, it was carefully watching the activities going on in the frontier areas of the state. Observing the political events happening in the Sinkiang, Mr. Olaf Caroe Chief Commissioner of Baluchistan warned it was

dangerous to the security of the Northern Frontier. Strengthening the argument of Mr. Olaf, R.A. Butler, a junior minister in the Indian Office also warned of a possible takeover of the Sinkiang by Russia. Butler described the importance of Sinkiang as 'a listening post' in Central Asia.<sup>37</sup> It was further observed that Soviet Russia had taken virtual control of Sinkiang province and it becomes an immediate necessity for the British to take over control of the Gilgit from the Jammu and Kashmir state.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, the Great Depression of 1929 declined the financial condition of Britain. This left with British with no open but to appeal to Maharaja to share the expenditure of Gilgit Agency to the tune of three quarters from the earlier two. The proposal for the same was put forwarded to Maharaja in 1931.<sup>39</sup> In response to the proposal put forward by the British Government of India, the Maharaja came up with his proposal regarding Gilgit. He proposed that his state will bear the entire costs incurred on the maintenance of the Gilgit Agency and would also take up the responsibility for its defense provided, however, that the system of 'diarchy' operating therein be better ended and his Governor be given the plenary authority in matters of administration over Gilgit. Besides the first proposal the Maharaja gave the British Government of India an alternative option proposing that if the Government of India so pleased, it may manage on its own the local administration as well as the defense of the Gilgit Wazart, its dependencies, and bear the entire cost required to maintain it.<sup>40</sup>

Maharaja had a firm conviction that the British would choose the first option and thus he shall regain his full control over the frontier outpost. However, all the calculations of the Maharaja fell flat when the British quite unexpectedly opted for the second option in which the Maharaja had offered them to assume the entire administrative, military, and pecuniary responsibilities of the region. He was accordingly asked to transfer all the rights to the British. This left no room for the Maharaja to take part in the negotiations which formally began in October 1934. The Maharaja was represented by his Prime Minister Colonel Colvin and the British Resident in Kashmir. They were dully assisted by B. J. Glancy who delineated the details of the Lease agreement. The lease finally came into effect on 26th March 1935 for sixty years.<sup>41</sup> The agreement of the Lease was signed on 26th March 1935 by Maharaja Hari Singh and the Resident in Kashmir, Colonel L.E. Lang, and was subsequently ratified by the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon on 3rd of April 1935.<sup>42</sup>

With the creation of the Soviet Union and the fear of Communism running over the monarchies, the British had more overt designs on Gilgit. British used the influence of its own Prime Minister to put pressure on Maharaja to agree to lease out the Agency of Gilgit. He had resisted hard but knew that unless he agreed there would be serious repercussions with the communal atmosphere getting more and more vitiated in Punjab. It would not take long to ferment trouble in Valley by spreading rumors through the Khabar-e-Zaina-Kadal and then put the pressure of the Muslims from Punjab on those of the Jammu region.<sup>43</sup> The British advocated the idea of lease primarily to build pressure on the Maharaja and secure merger of Gilgit with the North-Western Frontier Province. The British wanted the merger to ensure smooth and split military and political control between the N.W.F.P, Chitral, and Gilgit. The merger did not take place despite the efforts of the British Political Department. But the lease was a major blow to the Maharaja's influence in Gilgit and also to the territorial integrity of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>44</sup>

The Government of India felt relieved ever since the engagement of the Maharaja in the Kashmir crisis of 1931 and his subsequent debilitating control created a perfect scenario for the British to realize his ambitions in Gilgit. They finally achieved their goal when Colonel Colvin leased the entire Gilgit region to the British Government for sixty years from 1935.<sup>45</sup>

Thus the Lease agreement was signed and exchanged at Jammu on 26th March 1935. The conclusion of this agreement in effect meant the lapsing of the State's interest in the matters of civil and military administration in the Trans-Indus Gilgit territory. Apart from a contribution of Rupees fifteen thousand which was the sum of subsidies to the frontier chiefs, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was not liable to bear any financial expenditure on the civil administration in the area so leased under the agreement.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly the state Imperial troops stationed there vacated the leased territory in month of July 1935.<sup>47</sup> The Political Agent of Gilgit, Major Kirkbride assumed the charge of the leased Gilgit Wazarat on 1st August 1935 from the Governor of Gilgit, Rao Ratan Singh thereby assuming the overall responsibility of the said territory.<sup>48</sup>

So it may be noted that after the lease agreement, the territory of Gilgit continued to remain an integral part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Only the charge of all the civil and military administration of Gilgit was transferred to the Government of India. Also, the Maharaja reserved for him the mining rights in Gilgit and as a symbolic sovereign entitled to receive certain public honours as well.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus the Russian Revolution of 1917 which resulted in the formation of the USSR created a new challenge for the British on the northern frontiers. The assertion of authority by Hari Singh was seen with suspicion and particularly regarding Gilgit which resulted in the adoption of a hostile attitude by the British. Moreover, our study showed that another worrying factor for the British was the Chinese expansion in Kashgar and adjoining territories in alliance with Russians. To further add to their worries the powerful speech of Maharaja Hari Singh at Second Round Table Conference in 1931 in London made the British cautious to formulate the policy to keep Maharaja in their control. So the British hatched a conspiracy to weaken the rule of Hari Singh and destabilize the state. The policy of Divide and Rule in the state to deal with the Maharaja and the opportunity was found in rising political consciousness among the Muslims in the state. The Muslim leaders were given patronage with direct and indirect support by the British to put pressure on the Maharaja. It was done with the view to keep the Maharaja engaged in domestic affairs so that he could not take any decisions regarding Gilgit. Moreover, the fateful event of July 13, 1931, was used as an opportunity by the British to pressurize the Maharaja to appoint its officers to the State Council and virtually transfer the control of the administration to the British. Finally, it was Prime Minister M. Calvin of Maharaja persuaded him and made arrangements to lease the Gilgit to the British in 1935 for 60 years.

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- <sup>16</sup> Lamb, Alastair, p.22.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.
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