

The Anglo-Dogra Alliance and the Uprising of 1857

Dr. Anu Mankotia
Assistant Professor
Department Of History
Jammu University

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Abstract

It is a general impression that all the Indians participated in the Uprising of 1857; however, contrary to it Maharaja Gulab Singh, the Prince of the largest princely state of Jammu and Kashmir sided with the English at this critical juncture and rendered all possible assistance to the Government of India in men, money and material, which enabled the Government of India to recapture Delhi from the rebels.

Keywords: Nationalism, Brij Raj, Govardhan, Kharoti

What happen in the year 1857 in large parts of northern and central India has been given many names—some thought it was a “mutiny” of the sepoys of the British India Army; others believed it to be a “Popular revolt” of the civilian population. William Dalrymple has recently used the term “Uprising”¹. Eric Strokes, one of the foremost historians of 1857, has convincingly argued that it was not one movement but many², so any one name possibly will not suffice. The most immediate interpretation of the revolt was that it was a Muslim conspiracy to restore the Mughal Empire – an allegation which Syed Ahmed Khan countered almost immediately in a passionate pamphlet written in 1858³. According Peter Robb it was primarily a mutiny of the sepoys, later joined by the unruly mob, taking advantage of the general breakdown of law and order. However people like Benjamin Disraeli or Karl Marx who could see the element of “National Revolt” in what was commonly described as the “Military Mutiny”⁴. In 1864 John Kaye wrote the official history of 1857, *A History of the Sepoy War in India 1857-58*, and James Fitzjames Stephen, the conservative utilitarian ideologue of the empire, immediately use it in defence of the empire.

On the other hand, it is popularly believed that Veer Savarkar by calling it the “*First War of Independence*” inducted the narrative of nationalism. Jyotirmaya Sharma reminds that the word “*First*” did not feature in the original title of Savarkar’s book—it was a later day interpolation whether it was “*First*” or at all “*a war of independence*” has been hotly contested in the last one and half century. Contemporary official

thinking was deeply affected by the idea of the rebellion being located as a “Muslim Conspiracy”. Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) wrote a tract to counter this allegation, wherein he sought to examine the features that determined the nature of 1857⁵. By the end of the 19th century, the rebellion attracted and inspired the first generation of the Indian nationalism. In fact with the development of Indian nationalism, 1857 and the events that occurred as part of nationalist imagery. Thus V.D Savarkar, who was perhaps the first nationalist to write about 1857 in 1909 called it the “*Indian War of Independence*”. His pro-nationalist stance made Savarkar look with contempt and reject the British assertion that attributed the “*War*” to the greased cartridges. Savarkar harped on the fact that the 1857 movement continued even after the British governor general issued a proclamation to withdraw the offending greased cartridges. Savarkar went ahead and connected the rebellion to the “atrocities” committed by the British.⁶

Nationalism And 1857

Links between resistance movements\mutinies\rebellions concerned with opposition of alien authority on the one hand, and nationhood\identity on other have been sought by historians and nationalist leaders across the world, at different phases of history. More often such linkages and connections are written back into the narrative of resistance, which in retrospect becomes “National”, having an inspirational values of later day uprising. The Mutiny-in other places the Revolt of 1857 was no exception. Though localised in that it did not include all regions or segments of people, the revolt has been written into the history of Indian nationalism in a variety of ways. The theoretical stance can be related especially to Afro-Asian contexts of nationalism, where the “roots of the modern-educated elite and modern style politics are shallowest “making it possible to argue a historical connection between modern political activities and traditional resistance movements. One can even “assert the existence of a permanent, underlying ‘Ur-*Nationalism*’ which manifested its hostility to the European presence in a distinct series of historical forms.⁷

Contemporaneous descriptions and later representations casting the revolt in a nationalist mould continue to be valorised, re-interpreted and grafted into later narratives, glossing internal differences and fragmentations in ideological terrains. The purpose here is to mediate between the different strands of nationalist interpretation and then situate them in a critical and comparative analysis vis-a vis J&K. The ways in which the ‘National’ element was perceived in the uprising (by contemporary observers, and later historians) have varied. The strongest expression in this regard was Savarkar’s

early 20th century depiction of the uprising as “the Indian war of independence of 1857”, founded on the twin principles of ‘*Swardharma*’ and ‘*Swaraj*’, aiming to achieve freedom through the help of a secret organisation.⁸ Turning from such extreme positions, I argue through a case study of Jammu and Kashmir which happened to be part of Punjab during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that *national* had subtler and more nuanced reflections. In doing so, I also demonstrate how “nationalism ‘had different connotations in the actual uprising that flared in north and central India (the “mentality of the mutiny” in a general, pan Indian sense) and in more muted regional reactions and representations elsewhere in India, especially in Jammu and Kashmir. The kingdom of Jammu situated between the plains of the Punjab and the lower Himalayan region was an ancient principality. Its rulers had some times assisted the sultans of Delhi and the Mughal emperors to deal with the rebellious people between the rivers Chenab and Jhelum. In 1785, Mahan Singh, the chief of the *Sukerchakia Misl* and father of Ranjit Singh ordered his troops to plunder Jammu. Thus, with the resources of Jammu Mahan Singh consolidated his position and influence in the Punjab. He died in 1792 and, Ranjit Singh became the chief of the *Sukerchakia Misl*. On July 16, 1799; Ranjit Singh conquered the city of Lahore from the Bhangis, following chaos and confusion after fourth invasion of Zaman Shah on Lahore, and proclaimed himself the Maharaja. In the year 1800, Maharaja Ranjit Singh marched from Lahore to annex Jammu from Raja Ajit Singh, whose court had become the hub of the intrigues, which rendered the kingdom weak. Thus the occupation of Jammu by the Lahore durbar had very serious repercussions on the internal politics of Jammu that had far-reaching consequences. It led to the division of Jammu region into two hostile camps. Gulab Singh’s family played a sheet anchor’s role in almost all the campaigns of the Lahore durbar in the second decade of the nineteenth century. First in 1813 Gulab Singh and his father Mian Kishore Singh were associated with an unsuccessful campaign in Kashmir in which Kishore Singh was injured. Gulab Singh displayed extra-ordinary efficiency and courage and saved the lives of around two hundred soldiers of the Lahore durbar Sahrah and Rah kotli hangralan near Poonch for which he was duly rewarded with the grant of three *jagirs* of *Beyol*, *Kharoti*, *Bhandian* and the command of twenty- two horses.⁹ Therefore, On June 17, 1822, the Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself performed the *RajTilak* ceremony of Gulab Singh and conferred the government of Jammu on him.

However the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir was formed by the treaty of Amritsar on March 16, 1846. It was the largest princely State of India and its rulers were enjoying near despotic powers like rulers of the other princely states. Maharaja Gulab Singh was thoroughly initiated to the art of diplomacy and statecraft through his long association with Maharaja Ranjit Singh and British diplomats. He had thoroughly realised the importance of these and so sought to give appropriate training to the heir apparent in diplomatic relations with the British by often deputing him to meet the Governor-General, the commander-in chief, the Lieut-Governor of the Punjab and other eminent British Officers. On the occasion of signing the Treaty of Amritsar Gulab Singh especially sent for him from Jammu to attend the function and he deputed him to Gobindgarh fort to welcome the Governor General.¹⁰ In 1847, when Ranbir Singh was hardly seventeen he was assigned an important task. On establishing full possession of Jammu and Kashmir with British aid Maharaja Gulab Singh availed the first opportunity to send Ranbir Singh to Simla to wait upon the British Governor-General of India, Lord Hardinge, probably to offer him thanks for all the favours he had shown towards them and to pay the first tribute. However 20 February, 1856 was fixed as the auspicious day for the installation of Ranbir Singh as the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The Maharaja had informed the Resident at Lahore, of the date of installation and the British government put their seal of approval of the *Rajtilak* by presenting costly gifts to the new Maharaja and by sending a *khilat* to him through John Nocholson.¹¹ Therefore, the year following Ranbir Singh's accession to the *gaddi* was the most turbulent year in the history of India, but a comparatively peaceful period in the history of the State, and Maharaja Ranbir Singh utilised this occasion for an almost all round improvement in the administration of the State. After transferring all power to the new Maharaja Gulab Singh left for Kashmir and accepted to look after the administration of the valley as its governor. He was, however, an ailing person now. Maharaja Ranbir Singh held his darbars at Jammu and efficiently ran the government of the state with the help of his seasoned Prime Minister, Jawala Sahai and able secretary, Diwan Kirpa Ram, son of the latter.

However, during the spring of 1857, Gulab Singh's health deteriorated and soon it became worse so that Ranbir Singh rushed to Srinagar to attend on his dying father. It was during these days that "the first shots of the so called uprising were fired on the 10th May 1857¹² sporadic acts of violence had taken place in different parts of the

country.”But when the sepoys of Meerut murdered their white officer on the 10th May 1857 and proceeded to Delhi to proclaim Bahadur Shah Emperor of Hindustan;¹³ the great uprising commenced. Delhi, the citadel of British power in India was besieged by the rebels and it fell. Sir John Lawrence of the Governor of the Punjab received the information on 11th May, 1857, and he took immediate measures to strike at all the routes of disaffection. After strengthening the defence of the Punjab he conveyed the news to his allies and asked for help. He was particular concerned over Gulab Singh’s attitude whose duplicity and elusive diplomacy he had witnessed during the second Sikh War. He also realised that their position in Punjab was to great extent, at the Maharaja’s mercy.¹⁴ And very much feared that in case Gulab Singh turned against the British “his experience, his prestige, his resources would have produced a great reaction against them.¹⁵ In order to secure the help of Maharaja Gulab Singh he sent for Diwan Jawala Sahai who could be depended on at this juncture because “the Dewan was a subject of the British Government, and his family for the most part lived in British territory, I had known him Since 1846, and had reason to believe that he was well effected to the British Government and had considerable confidence in him”¹⁶ Jawala Sahai met Lawrence at Rawalpindi and Lawrence took him into confidence apprised him of the situation and suggested that the Dewan should move the Maharaja to send a selected body of hill-men to help in the siege of Delhi. Lawrence records:”The Dewan first hesisted, but on my explaining what an advantage it would prove to the Maharaja to come forward in such a crisis, provided His Highness really meant to act up to his engagement, the Dewan entered into my view, and agreed to proceed to Jammu and ascertain the state of affairs; to communicate with the Maharaja, should things appear propitious; and in short, to arrange, in that case for the March of the troops”.¹⁷ A copy of the letter written to Maharaja Gulab Singh by the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab dated 27 May 1857, expressed appreciation of the friendship of the Maharaja and his help to the British on previous occasion to him to stand with the British in hour of supreme need.¹⁸ In response to these appeals Gulab Singh, who was virtually on his death bed, offered all the resources of his state to British Government.¹⁹ He immediately wrote to Maharaja Ranbir Singh at Jammu-“News had come that the Indian soldiers at Lahore and Sialkot rebelled. It is hoped that the British Government will be able to suppress it .But what is needed, is, that you should be vigitent about your soldiers and forts. Reports must reach me regularly. It is most urgent.”²⁰ At the same

time he cautioned Diwan Hari Chand against spread of rebellion in his territories and issued strict injunction that no *Purbia* should be enlisted in army, as also deserters from the British troops should not only be refused recruitment, but should be captured.²¹

Finally, Ranbir Singh, together with Diwan Hari Chand, was ordered to go with a large force to help in the siege of Delhi.²² Consequently four battalions, *Dhani*, *Narain*, *Brij Raj* and *Govardhan* together with an artillery under the command of Diwan Hari Chand, were sent to Delhi.²³ The contingence despatched consisted of nearly 3,000 men including 2000, infantry, 200 cavalry, with 6 guns.²⁴ Ranbir Singh himself accompanied the troops to Delhi, but he had to return on account of the death of his father on 2 August 1857, and troops of Jammu and Kashmir marched under the leadership of Diwan Hari Chand.

The Chief Commissioner sent his own brother, Capt. R.C. Lawrence in political charge of the contingent, assisted by six selected British Officers. The Maharaja also sent a loan of six lakhs of rupees²⁵. After crossing the satluj cholera broke out in their banks, notwithstanding which, and the great heat of the season, the troops reached Delhi at a critical moment in the history of the 1857. During the storm of Delhi, a portion of these troops formed part of the column which attacked the advanced positions of the mutineers in the suburbs of Delhi, with the view of making diversion of the main object the assault of the city. In this affair the state troops suffered considerably. The very day after Delhi fell, Diwan Jawala Sahai's brother, the Commander of these troops and the Maharaja's wakil both died of cholera, which greatly depressed the minds of the native officers and men.

After Hari Chand's death the Dogra contingent was commanded by R.C. Lawrence, although soon after Nihal Chand, youngest brother of Diwan Jawala Sahai, had reached Delhi by forced marches to take the place of Hari Chand. After the fall of Delhi the Jammu contingent was employed for the suppression of uprising in Jhaggar where it did an appreciable work.²⁶ The British Government made a particular mention of the service rendered by Diwan Hari Chand, Diwan Nihal Chand, Col. Sangara, Kumedan Mehar Singh, adjutant Labha and about half a dozen junior officers.²⁷ Rai Duley Chand the special political agent of the Maharaja accompanying the troops also died of cholera at Delhi during the operation and his office was taken over by his son Radha Kishen, and Mian Ganga Singh, one after the other. The British Government appreciated the services rendered by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir in the task of suppressing the

uprising of 1857. Sir John Lawrence was particularly obliged to the Maharaja for the friendly help which was available at a place far away from the territories of His Highness though according to the treaty (March 16, 1846) such help was only expected when the British troops were employed with in the hills or in the territories adjoining his possession.²⁸ Even the Queen despatched presents for the Maharaja and conveyed her commendation about his loyalty and sincerity, through Sir Charles Wood, secretary of state for India.²⁹ The Maharaja was also given the title of C.O.S.I in an investiture Darbar held at Lahore by Lord Canning in 1858, on which occasion he delivered a speech and loyalty to the Queen and Her Government.³⁰ Maharaja Ranbir Singh felt proud that he had rendered a useful service in the tradition of his father and helped suppressing the rebels and was glad that the insurgents had been crushed. The British believed that the services of Maharaja Ranbir Singh cemented the hands of friendship between him and the British.³¹

Maharaja Gulab Singh was criticised by the historians for rendering help to the Government of India in crushing the popular revolt. In this regard one can argue that Maharaja Gulab Singh's attitude in helping the British during the uprising can be viewed in the light of Russell's observation that it is not in human nature, as broken treaties in all time testify, to maintain an entire devotion to a tottering State; and "Self preservation has the same influence over the conduct of kings that it exercises over the acts of private individuals."³² Maharaja Gulab Singh was not slow in comprehending the nature of the rising and its weaknesses, and so realised that the security and continuity of his rule could only be guaranteed if the British remained in power in India. In case of failure of British power at that time nothing but chaos, confusion and insecurity would have ensued. The rebels also stood no chance of success in his estimation. Since, he never believed in crude Speculation, He lost no time in rendering help to the British which he actually owed to them in gratitude.

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