



Power, Politics and State Formation: Gulab Singh and the Rise of Dogra Rule in Kashmir in the Early 19th Century

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Abstract

This study interrogates the processes of power consolidation and state formation in early nineteenth-century northern India through a critical examination of the rise of Gulab Singh and the establishment of Dogra rule in Kashmir. Situating this transition within the disintegration of late Mughal authority and the subsequent expansion and fragmentation of the Sikh polity under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the paper foregrounds the interplay between imperial decline, regional agency and strategic opportunism. It analyzes the political trajectory of Gulab Singh from a subordinate noble within the Sikh administrative framework to an autonomous sovereign, emphasizing his calibrated engagement with shifting power structures, territorial consolidation in the hill territories and diplomatic manoeuvring during the First Anglo-Sikh War. The study further interrogates the implications of the Treaty of Amritsar (1846) as a moment of negotiated sovereignty that reconfigured territorial authority through colonial intervention. By integrating political, economic and geopolitical perspectives, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of state formation, legitimacy and power in a transitional imperial context.

Keywords: East India Company, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Treaty of Lahore (March 1846), Treaty of Amritsar (March 16, 1846)

I. Introduction

While the Kashmir Valley was experiencing the realities of Sikh rule, a parallel transformation was unfolding in the neighbouring region of Jammu. This development, though initially less visible, would prove to be equally significant in shaping the political future of the wider region. The decline of Mughal authority in northern India during the eighteenth century had created a fragmented political landscape, where regional powers competed for influence and control. In this environment, Jammu gradually emerged as an important center of power, eventually coming under

the influence of the expanding Sikh Empire led by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The incorporation of Jammu into the Sikh Empire was not an isolated event but part of a broader pattern of consolidation. The strategy of Ranjit Singh was pragmatic and calculated. Rather than imposing direct control everywhere, he often relied on capable local elites to administer regions, ensuring their loyalty while allowing them a degree of autonomy. In Jammu, this policy opened the door for individuals of ambition and skill to rise within the imperial system. Among them, Gulab Singh emerged as a particularly significant figure. Beginning his career modestly, he navigated the complexities of regional politics with remarkable acumen. His rise was not merely personal success; it reflected the opportunities created by a changing political order. Over time, his influence would extend far beyond Jammu, playing a decisive role in shaping the future of Kashmir itself.

From Court to Crown: The Emergence and Political Ascendancy of Gulab Singh

The early life of Gulab Singh offers insight into the nature of social mobility and political opportunity during this period. Born into the Dogra Rajput lineage, he belonged to a group that had a long-standing presence in the hill regions of Jammu. However, his rise to prominence was not simply a product of lineage; it was shaped by his own abilities and the changing political environment. As a young man, he entered the service of the Sikh army, a decision that placed him within one of the most dynamic military forces of the time. The Sikh army under Ranjit Singh was known for its discipline, organization and adaptability. It brought together soldiers from diverse backgrounds and provided a platform for advancement based on merit and performance. For Gulab Singh, this environment proved to be a crucial training ground. Through participation in military campaigns, he gained experience in strategy, leadership and the practical aspects of governance. His conduct in these campaigns earned him recognition and



gradually elevated his status within the ranks. What distinguished Gulab Singh from many of his contemporaries was not only his military skill but also his political acumen. He understood that success within the Sikh Empire required more than battlefield achievements; it also depended on building relationships, demonstrating loyalty and navigating the complexities of court politics. By aligning himself with the interests of Ranjit Singh and proving his reliability, he secured the trust of the central authority. This combination of military capability and political awareness enabled Gulab Singh to rise steadily through the hierarchy. His advancement was marked by a series of responsibilities and opportunities that expanded his influence. Each campaign in which he participated served as both a test of his abilities and a step toward greater authority. Over time, he became not just a soldier but a figure of significance within the imperial structure.

The turning point in his career came in 1822, when he was appointed as the Raja of Jammu. This appointment was a moment of profound importance, both for him personally and for the region as a whole. By granting him this title, Ranjit Singh effectively recognized his authority over Jammu while incorporating him into the framework of the Sikh Empire. The position of Raja conferred not only status but also administrative and political responsibilities, transforming Gulab Singh from a military leader into a regional ruler. The significance of this appointment extends beyond the individual. It marked the beginning of Dogra ascendancy in the region, a development that would have lasting consequences for the political landscape of northern India. Under his leadership, Jammu became more than a peripheral territory; it emerged as a center of power capable of influencing events beyond its immediate boundaries.

As Raja, Gulab Singh faced the challenge of consolidating his authority in a region characterized by diversity and complexity. Jammu was not a homogeneous territory; it encompassed various communities, landscapes and political traditions. Governing such a region required a careful balance between asserting control and accommodating local conditions. Gulab Singh approached this task with a combination of firmness and pragmatism, seeking to establish order while maintaining stability.

One of the key aspects of his rule was the strengthening of administrative structures. By organizing revenue collection, maintaining law and order and overseeing local governance, he laid the foundation for a more coherent system of

administration. These efforts not only enhanced his authority but also contributed to the integration of Jammu into the broader framework of the Sikh Empire. At the same time, Gulab Singh continued to expand his influence through military means. The experience he had gained as a soldier now served him well in his role as a ruler. He understood the importance of securing borders, controlling strategic routes and extending his authority into neighbouring regions. These objectives would later lead to a series of campaigns that expanded Dogra power and reshaped the geopolitical map of the region. An important figure in these military endeavours was Zorawar Singh, one of most trusted generals of Gulab Singh. Known for his leadership and determination, Zorawar Singh played a crucial role in executing the expansionist vision of his ruler. Together, they embarked on campaigns that brought new territories under Dogra control, strengthening their position within the Sikh Empire.

The rise of Gulab Singh must also be understood within the broader context of the political structure of Sikh Empire. Ranjit Singh's governance relied on a network of loyal nobles and regional rulers who managed different parts of the empire. This system allowed for a degree of decentralization, enabling local leaders to exercise authority while remaining subordinate to the central power. The position of Gulab Singh as Raja of Jammu exemplified this arrangement, as he operated with a level of autonomy while maintaining allegiance to Lahore. However, this balance between autonomy and loyalty required careful management. Gulab Singh had to ensure that his actions did not conflict with the interests of the central authority, while also pursuing his own goals of consolidation and expansion. His ability to navigate this delicate balance contributed significantly to his success.

The rise of Dogra power under Gulab Singh also had deep implications for the Kashmir Valley. As Jammu grew in strength and influence, it began to play a more active role in the regional dynamics surrounding Kashmir. The proximity of Jammu to the valley, combined with his expanding authority, positioned him as a key figure in the future of the region. Although he initially operated within the framework of the Sikh Empire, his growing power would later enable him to shape events in ways that extended beyond imperial boundaries.

Another important aspect of his rise is the accumulation of wealth and resources. Military campaigns and administrative control provided access to revenue, which in turn strengthened his position. Wealth allowed him to maintain a capable



army, support his administration and reinforce his status within the political hierarchy. This economic dimension was closely linked to his political and military achievements, forming a cycle that further consolidated his power. At the same time, the rise of Gulab Singh reflects the broader patterns of state formation in the region during this period. The decline of larger empires, such as the Mughals, had created opportunities for regional powers to assert themselves. Leaders like Gulab Singh were able to capitalize on these opportunities, building new political structures that combined elements of older traditions with emerging realities. In this sense, his career can be seen as part of a larger historical process of transition and reorganization.

It is also important to consider the perspective of the local population in understanding the rise of Dogra power. While the consolidation of authority under Gulab Singh brought a degree of order and stability, it also involved the assertion of control over diverse communities. The impact of these changes would have varied depending on social, economic and regional factors. For some, the new administration may have offered opportunities, while for others, it may have represented a continuation of hierarchical structures.

The rise of Gulab Singh stands out as a moment of transformation, where individual ambition, military skill and political strategy came together to shape the course of history. His journey from a young recruit in the Sikh army to the Raja of Jammu illustrates the possibilities that existed within the dynamic political environment of the time. At the same time, it highlights the complexities of power, where success depended not only on personal ability but also on the ability to navigate broader structures and relationships. The emergence of Gulab Singh and the rise of Dogra power represent a crucial chapter in the history of Jammu and Kashmir. This development unfolded alongside the experiences of Sikh rule in Kashmir, adding another layer to the regional evolving political landscape. Through his military achievements, administrative efforts and strategic vision, Gulab Singh laid the foundation for a new phase in the history; one that would continue to shape its trajectory in the years to come.

Military Expansion and Territorial Consolidation

The rise of Dogra power under Gulab Singh was not confined to administrative consolidation within Jammu; it was equally defined by a series of ambitious military campaigns that transformed the political geography of the wider Himalayan region.

These campaigns, carried out over several decades, were not random acts of conquest but carefully planned efforts aimed at securing strategic territories, strengthening political authority and establishing a durable regional presence. At the center of these efforts stood Gulab Singh and his trusted general, Zorawar Singh, whose leadership and vision played a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of Dogra expansion.

The early nineteenth century was a period marked by shifting political boundaries and the decline of older imperial structures. In this fluid environment, control over territory was closely linked to both security and prestige. For Gulab Singh, expanding beyond Jammu was not merely an act of ambition but a strategic necessity. The regional location, surrounded by hill states and connected to important trade routes, made it vulnerable to external pressures. By extending his authority into neighbouring areas, he sought to create a buffer that would protect his domain while also enhancing its economic and political significance.

The initial phase of Dogra expansion focused on consolidating control over nearby regions such as Rajouri and Kishtwar. These territories, brought under Dogra authority in 1821, were important both geographically and strategically. Rajouri served as a key link between the plains and the hill regions, while Kishtwar provided access to routes leading further into the mountainous interior. Securing these areas not only strengthened the defensive position of Jammu but also created a foundation for future campaigns. These early successes demonstrated the effectiveness of Dogra military organization. The forces under Gulab Singh were disciplined and adaptable, capable of operating in challenging terrains that would have posed difficulties for less experienced armies. The ability to navigate mountainous landscapes, manage supply lines and maintain cohesion in difficult conditions became a defining feature of Dogra military operations. This expertise would prove invaluable as campaigns moved into even more remote and demanding regions. A key figure in these endeavours was Zorawar Singh, whose role as a military commander was central to the success of Dogra expansion. Known for his determination, strategic insight and willingness to undertake bold initiatives, Zorawar Singh emerged as one of the most capable generals of his time. His leadership combined careful planning with a readiness to adapt to changing circumstances, allowing him to achieve victories in



environments that were often unpredictable and harsh.

The expansion into the Suru Valley and Kargil in 1835 marked a significant step forward in the consolidation of Dogra power. These regions, located in the high-altitude areas to the northeast of Kashmir, were not only strategically important but also served as gateways to further expansion into Ladakh. Controlling these territories meant gaining access to routes that connected different parts of the Himalayan region, thereby enhancing both military mobility and economic potential.

The conquest of Ladakh between 1834 and 1840 stands out as one of the most remarkable achievements of Dogra expansion. Ladakh, with its rugged terrain, extreme climate and distinct cultural identity, presented formidable challenges to any invading force. Yet, under the leadership of Zorawar Singh, Dogra troops managed to overcome these obstacles and establish control over the region. This campaign required not only military skill but also logistical innovation, as maintaining supply lines in such conditions demanded careful planning and resourcefulness. The significance of Ladakh extended beyond its immediate geographical boundaries. It was a region that connected South Asia with Central Asia and Tibet, making it an important hub for trade and cultural exchange. By bringing Ladakh under Dogra control, Gulab Singh effectively positioned himself at a crossroads of regional interaction. This not only enhanced his political standing but also opened up new avenues for economic activity. Following the consolidation of Ladakh, Dogra expansion continued into Baltistan in 1840. This region, located further to the north, added another layer to the emerging sphere of Dogra influence. The campaign in Baltistan, like those in Ladakh and Kargil, required the ability to operate in difficult terrain and navigate complex local dynamics. Success in this endeavour further reinforced the reputation of Dogra forces as capable and resilient.

The cumulative effect of these campaigns was the creation of a territorial network that surrounded the Kashmir Valley. By controlling regions to the south, east and north, Gulab Singh achieved a position of strategic advantage. This configuration allowed him to influence developments within Kashmir while also securing his own domains against potential threats. In essence, the expansion created a framework within which political authority could be exercised more effectively.

The success of Dogra military campaigns can be attributed to several interconnected factors.

Firstly, the organization and discipline of the army played a crucial role. Unlike loosely structured forces, Dogra troops operated within a system that emphasized coordination and efficiency. This allowed them to respond effectively to the demands of different terrains and combat situations. Secondly, leadership was a defining element. Gulab Singh provided the overall vision and direction, while Zorawar Singh translated that vision into practical military action. The relationship between the two was one of mutual trust and shared objectives, which contributed to the coherence of their efforts. The ability of Zorawar Singh to inspire his troops and maintain morale under difficult conditions further enhanced the effectiveness of the campaigns. Thirdly, adaptability was a key strength of Dogra forces. Operating in the Himalayan region required a willingness to adjust strategies based on local conditions. Weather, terrain and logistical constraints all posed challenges that could not be addressed through rigid planning alone. The ability to innovate and respond to these challenges allowed Dogra troops to succeed where others might have faltered.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that military expansion was not without its costs. Campaigns in remote regions required significant resources and maintaining control over newly acquired territories posed ongoing challenges. The integration of diverse regions into a single political framework required administrative effort and, at times, negotiation with local populations. While military success established authority, sustaining that authority depended on effective governance. The impact of these expansions on local populations also varied. In some areas, the establishment of Dogra rule may have brought a degree of stability and order, while in others, it may have been experienced as an imposition of external control. The diversity of the regions involved meant that responses to Dogra authority were not uniform. Understanding these variations is essential for a balanced view of the period.

From a broader perspective, the military expansion under Gulab Singh and Zorawar Singh can be seen as part of a larger pattern of state formation in the nineteenth century. As older empires declined, new political entities emerged, often through a combination of military conquest and administrative consolidation. The Dogra state, with its expanding territorial base, represents one such entity, shaped by both regional dynamics and individual leadership. The campaigns also highlight the interconnected nature of politics, geography and economy. Control over territory was not only about



military dominance but also about access to resources, trade routes and strategic positions. By extending his influence into Ladakh and Baltistan, Gulab Singh was not merely expanding his domain; he was integrating his state into a wider network of regional interactions.

In evaluating the achievements of this period, it is clear that the role of Zorawar Singh deserves particular attention. His leadership in high-altitude campaigns, often conducted under extreme conditions, earned him a lasting reputation as one of the most capable commanders of his time. His ability to combine courage with strategic thinking made him a key figure in the success of Dogra expansion. The military expansion and territorial consolidation carried out under Gulab Singh and Zorawar Singh represent a defining phase in the history of the region. Through a series of carefully planned campaigns, they transformed Jammu from a regional power into a significant political entity with influence extending across the Himalayan landscape. These developments not only reshaped the geopolitical map but also laid the foundation for future political arrangements in Jammu and Kashmir.

The story of this expansion is one of ambition, strategy and adaptation, set against the backdrop of a changing political world. It illustrates how leadership, organization and vision can come together to produce lasting historical change, even in the most challenging environments.

Political Influence within the Sikh Empire

The rise of Gulab Singh was not limited to territorial expansion or military success; it was equally defined by his growing political influence within the Sikh Empire. As he consolidated his authority in Jammu and extended his reach into surrounding regions, he also cultivated a powerful position at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This dual presence, both as a regional ruler and as a key participant in imperial politics, allowed him to operate across multiple layers of power, shaping not only his own fortunes but also the broader political landscape of northern India.

The Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a complex and dynamic political entity. It brought together diverse regions, communities and administrative traditions under a centralized authority, while still allowing a degree of autonomy to local rulers and nobles. This balance between central control and regional delegation created opportunities for individuals who could demonstrate both loyalty and capability. Gulab Singh emerged as one of the most successful figures in navigating this

system, carefully positioning himself within its structures while steadily expanding his own influence. A crucial factor in the rise of Gulab Singh was his relationship with Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Loyalty to the ruler was a key requirement for advancement within the Sikh Empire and Gulab Singh consistently demonstrated his commitment through both military service and political conduct. His participation in campaigns, his success in securing territories and his ability to maintain order in Jammu all contributed to building trust between him and the Maharaja. This trust, once established, became a valuable asset, enabling him to gain responsibilities and privileges that were not easily accessible to others. However, loyalty alone was not sufficient to secure such a position. His effectiveness lay in his ability to translate loyalty into tangible results. His military campaigns brought new territories under Sikh influence, strengthening the empire as a whole while simultaneously enhancing his own standing. His administrative efforts in Jammu ensured stability and revenue, demonstrating that he could govern as well as conquer. In this sense, he embodied the qualities that the Sikh Empire valued in its nobles: competence, reliability and strategic insight.

The dual nature of Gulab Singh's role within the empire deserves particular attention. On the one hand, he functioned as a subordinate ruler, operating within the framework of the Sikh state and acknowledging the authority of Lahore. On the other hand, he exercised considerable autonomy in managing his own territories and pursuing his own ambitions. This balance allowed him to benefit from the legitimacy and support of the empire while also building an independent base of power. Navigating this dual role required a deep understanding of imperial politics. The court of Ranjit Singh was not a simple or static environment; it was a space where alliances were formed, rivalries developed and decisions were influenced by a variety of factors. Gulab Singh's success in this setting suggests a high degree of political skill. He was able to maintain favourable relationships, avoid unnecessary conflicts and position himself as a dependable figure in a system where trust and reputation were essential. As his influence grew, so too did his access to resources. Wealth played a significant role in reinforcing political power and Gulab Singh was able to accumulate substantial economic assets through his campaigns and administration. Revenue from conquered territories, control over trade routes and the ability to mobilize resources all contributed to his growing financial strength. This wealth, in turn, supported his military and administrative



activities, creating a cycle of expansion and consolidation.

The accumulation of resources also enhanced his standing within the Sikh court. In a political environment where power was closely linked to the ability to command men and resources, his growing wealth made him an increasingly important figure. He was not merely a beneficiary of imperial favour but a contributor to the strength of the empire, which further solidified his position. At the same time, his rise must be understood within the broader context of the political structure. Ranjit Singh's governance relied on a network of nobles who managed different regions, each bringing their own capabilities and ambitions. This system, while effective in many ways, also required careful management to prevent fragmentation or conflict. His ability to operate within this framework without provoking significant opposition speaks to his strategic approach to power. An important aspect of his political influence was his ability to extend his reach beyond Jammu. While his primary base remained in his own territories, his role within the Sikh administration allowed him to engage with broader regional issues. His involvement in military campaigns and his presence at the court connected him to developments across the empire, enabling him to influence decisions and shape outcomes in ways that extended beyond his immediate domain. By the late 1830s, Gulab Singh had established himself as one of the most prominent nobles in the Sikh Empire. His influence was not limited to formal authority but also included informal power derived from his reputation, relationships and resources. He was recognized as a figure of importance, whose actions could have significant implications for the stability and direction of the empire.

The Death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 marked a turning point in the history of the Sikh Empire. The strong central authority that had maintained cohesion began to weaken, leading to a period of uncertainty and internal struggle. In this changing environment, the position of influential nobles like Gulab Singh became even more significant. Their ability to navigate shifting alliances and maintain stability in their own regions played a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of this period. For Gulab Singh, this moment presented both challenges and opportunities. The decline of central authority created space for regional leaders to assert greater independence, but it also introduced new risks, as rival factions competed for power. His prior

experience, combined with the resources he had accumulated, allowed him to respond to these changes with a degree of flexibility. He was not entirely dependent on the central authority, nor was he isolated from it; instead, he occupied a position that enabled him to adapt to evolving circumstances. The influence that Gulab Singh had built over the years extended beyond the boundaries of the Sikh Empire. His control over strategic regions, his involvement in trade networks and his connections with other political actors positioned him as a key figure in the broader politics of northern India. This wider influence reflects the interconnected nature of the region during this period, where local and imperial dynamics were closely intertwined.

The death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in June 1839 created a massive power vacuum, bringing an end to the stable, centralized rule of the Sikh Empire and initiating a period of anarchy, palace intrigues and rapid assassinations. This instability allowed Gulab Singh, a wily and ambitious Dogra Rajput chieftain who had served as a trusted commander and Raja of Jammu under Ranjit Singh, to exploit the crumbling Khalsa state, consolidate his own power and eventually manoeuvre into a position to purchase the state of Jammu and Kashmir from the British in 1846.

Palace Intrigues and Power Struggle (1839-43): Following the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Sikh court was divided. Gulab Singh and his brothers (Dhian Singh and Suchet Singh) were deeply involved in the court politics. When Kharak Singh and his son Nau Nihal Singh were murdered (1840) and Sher Singh was later installed (1841), Gulab Singh used his position as a powerful Dogra noble to defend the fort and secure a significant portion of the royal treasure from Lahore to strengthen his base in Jammu. While the Lahore Durbar was busy with conspiracies, Gulab Singh stayed largely aloof from the immediate Lahore happenings, focusing instead on Jammu. By the time of the demise of Ranjit Singh, he had already established authority in Jammu, Rajouri and Kishtwar and subsequently expanded his control to include Baltistan (1840) and Gilgit (1842).

The First Anglo-Sikh War and Strategic Betrayal: When the First Anglo-Sikh War broke out (1845-46), Gulab Singh, considered the 'Ulysses of the hills,' did not actively support the Sikh army (Khalsa Fauj), whom he was meant to lead as a general. Instead, he acted as a broker, staying neutral or negotiating secretly with the British. After the Sikh defeat, the Lahore Durbar was forced to pay a heavy indemnity to the British (Treaty of



Lahore, March 1846) which they could not afford. The Sikhs were compelled to cede all the hill states between the rivers Ravi and Indus including Kashmir, to the British.

Through the Treaty of Amritsar (March 16, 1846), as a reward for his strategic neutrality and secret negotiations during the war, the British recognized Gulab Singh as an independent Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The British East India Company sold the territory of Kashmir to him for 7.5 million Nanakshahee Rupees, formalizing the creation of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir with Gulab Singh as its first ruler. Essentially, the death of Ranjit Singh broke the strong, merit-based system that kept the Dogra ambitions under control, allowing Gulab Singh to transform from a loyal subject into an independent sovereign of a vast, newly created state.

It is also important to consider the implications of Gulab Singh's rise for the people living within his territories. While his consolidation of power brought a degree of order and administrative structure, it also reinforced hierarchical systems of authority. The benefits of political stability were often accompanied by the realities of centralized control, where decisions were made at the top and implemented across diverse communities. The impact of these changes would have varied depending on local conditions and social contexts.

II. Conclusion

From a historical perspective, his political influence can be seen as a reflection of both individual capability and structural opportunity. His rise was made possible by the conditions of the time, including the expansion of the Sikh Empire and the decline of older political structures. At the same time, it was his own actions—his military successes, his administrative efforts and his strategic decisions—that enabled him to take full advantage of these conditions.

The position of Gulab Singh within the Sikh Empire illustrates the complex interplay between regional authority and imperial power. By combining loyalty with ambition and military success with political skill, he was able to establish himself as one of the most influential figures of his time. His dual role as a regional ruler and a key member of the Sikh administration allowed him to navigate the intricacies of imperial politics effectively, building a foundation of power that would have lasting consequences. The legacy of his influence extends beyond the immediate period, shaping the subsequent history of Jammu and Kashmir and contributing to the broader patterns of

political change in northern India. His story is not only one of personal achievement but also of the ways in which power is constructed, negotiated and sustained within complex political systems.

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