

FORGING PROSPERITY: ECONOMIC REFORMS AND DEVELOPMENT DURING GULAB SINGH'S REIGN (1822-1857)

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Abstract

Gulab Singh's era in Indian history, which began when he joined the Lahore court as a humble soldier in 1809, was nothing short of transformative. His rise from obscurity to greatness was marked by significant military campaigns, including the siege of Kashmir in 1812-13, the Jallundher campaign, the conquest of Resai (1815-16), and the Frontier Campaigns (1815-19). These victories and others established Gulab Singh's authority over a vast area in the Jammu region by 1821, leading to his appointment as the Raja of Jammu in 1822. However, Gulab Singh's legacy goes beyond military conquests. He implemented a uniform taxation system, fostering economic stability and equitable resource distribution. His recognition of the potential in the shawl industry and his support for it spurred economic growth and preserved local craftsmanship and culture. In addition, Gulab Singh promoted collaboration and cooperation among the Gyalpos in Ladakh, ensuring the integration of the region's economy. His hands-off approach to agriculture allowed peasants to cultivate crops of their choice, embodying a progressive and inclusive governance style. The British, however, saw Gulab Singh's independent approach as a threat and attempted to interfere in his developmental efforts, particularly in Ladakh. Fortunately, Gulab Singh's resilience minimised British interference, preventing his state from suffering the same fate as other provinces under oppressive British policies. Gulab Singh's rule left an indelible mark on the region, combining territorial expansion with economic development. His forward-thinking reforms laid the foundation for prosperity and cultural vibrancy. His ability to resist British

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interference preserved his state's well-being. Gulab Singh's legacy remains celebrated in Indian history, embodying ideals of progress, inclusivity, and self-determination.

Keywords: Gulab Singh, Jammu and Kashmir, Territorial Expansion, Trade, commerce, British Interference

Introduction

In 1809, Gulab Singh joined the Lahore court as an ordinary soldier. However, in due course of time, he proved his worth in various military campaigns, like the siege of Kashmir 1812-13, the Jallundher campaign, the conquest of Resai, (1815-16), Frontier Campaigns (1815-19), Multan (1819), and Kishtwar (1821) etc. The results of these campaigns were such that by 1821, Gulab Singh's authority came to be established over a vast area in the Jammu region. In 1822, he was made Raja of Jammu as a reward for his services. The "Raj-Tilak" was bestowed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh on June 17, 1822. Gulab Singh, duly assisted by his commanders, started his policy of expansion and consolidation. The death of Ranjit Singh in 1839 created a void but also became an opportunity for Gulab Singh to be directly involved in the matters of Kashmir. The First Anglo-British War ended with the Treaty of Lahore, signed on 9 March 1846. Gulab Singh played an important role and was instrumental in preventing the complete annexation of the Sikh State by the British. The Treaty of Amritsar signed on 16 March 1846 laid the foundation of the State of Jammu Kashmir.

Gulab Singh's period is also known for bringing in economic transformation. Agrarian and non-agrarian economies were emphasised equally in the state programme and policies. The agricultural sector employed more than 75% of the State's population and was the primary source of income. As a result, the agrarian economy has been a significant concern, affecting all aspects of the state's society in various ways. In terms of agrarian reforms, this time period is equally noteworthy in Jammu Kashmir's history. A significant portion of the population relied on trade and commerce to survive. In this background, this paper examines the state of the economy during the reign of Gulab Singh.

Agriculture

Gulab Singh after becoming the Maharaja of Jammu Kashmir continued with the land revenue policies that were being continued

since the Sikh rule in the region. He did not consider it revised in the very beginning because his primary concern was the consolidation and establishment of peace and tranquillity in the region. As far as the practice of revenue collection in the state was concerned, the peasants had to pay in kind after the harvest. The initial method commonly practised for land revenue collection in the early years of his reign was Batai, which was based on crop sharing (Wingate 1888). Batai was a system of land revenue which was continued from earlier periods. In this method of crop sharing the produce was arranged into heaps and divided (Lawrence 1848: 191-197; Lai 1848: 4-6; Banga 1978: 88), one of which was taken by the state (Lawrence 1848). Maharaja was very aware of the nuances of this practice, and he wanted to change it, but knowing about the condition of the peasantry, he continued with this.

The Lahore Court resident H M Lawrence sent his aide R C Taylor to enquire about the existing conditions of the peasantry when he got the input about the deteriorating conditions. When Taylor interviewed the commoners, they said they were happy with Maharaja's rule. Taylor advised the maharaja to alleviate the conditions of the peasantry. When H M Lawrence visited the state in 1850, he showed keen interest in improving the status of peasants. Gulab Singh admitted that the corruption on the part of the officials was the main reason for the problematic land revenue collection. Walter Lawrence praised the efforts of Maharaja Gulab Singh by saying that, "Gulab Singh "brought the principle of personality to perfection and showed the people that he could stand by himself. Gulab Singh initiated a series of reforms.

He was able to improve peasant circumstances by regulating numerous methods of assessment and income-collecting processes. Large stretches of newly broken land (Nau-tor) were laying waste, which the Maharaja wanted quickly recovered. Thus, certain concessions were given. A handful of grass-rakhs were set aside for farming. Maharaja Gulab Singh was concerned about the growth and production of the state's main products, including saffron, wheat, shawl and iron manufacturing, and even walnuts, whether directly or indirectly.

The Empire was partitioned into provinces in 1852, encompassing Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, and Frontier territories (File No. 1, J&K State Archives 1873; Powell 1882: 532-534). The two provinces of Jammu and Kashmir were given to Wazir, or ministers, who served similarly to provincial governors (Bawa 1988: 166-167). However, later on, the task of revenue collection was given to military officials (Lal & Hangloo 1982: 501-509).

There were various parganas in these two provinces (district). The Zilahdars (district officers) and the thanadar (police officer) were the highest-ranking officials in each pargana. He commanded between 40 and 50 sepoys. His job was to keep the peace and order, monitor the state of the crops and report back to his tehsildar. Tehsildar has two to five Territorial sub-divisions under him, and he was in charge of the finances in his area. Within his tehsil, he had the authority to punish disagreements and transgressions. He had 200 to 400 sepoys at his disposal to assist him. Qanungos were the revenue officials looking after revenue collection in their respective areas. Gulab Singh visited the parganas regularly, and during the latter half of his reign, he showed a particular interest in cotton, silk, saffron, chestnuts, tobacco, and opium production, although few tangible actions were done to promote or expand these businesses.

Patwari, Muqaddam, Chaudhury, and other important officials involved in land revenue collection. Not only did they collect land revenue, but maintenance of law and order was also their responsibility. The revenue collected by these officials was duly checked and audited by the apex body called Daftar-i-Deewani (Lawrence 1895: 401; Kaul 1923: 228).

The third department was known as 'Dafter-i-Nizamat' (Land Record/Office), and it was responsible for maintaining land records throughout the state as well as reporting to the Maharaja on the condition of the 'Zamindars' at the end of each harvest. The fourth department was responsible for maintaining internal peace and preventing and relocating criminal activity. The Maharaja established a fifth department, the Treasury Department, which was overseen by a different 'Dewan,' while another 'Dewan' was in charge of the Maharaja's household and private 'Toshkhana.' The information department was led by another 'Dewan.' The Maharaja's men remained under his command. Maharaja liberalised the system of forced labour (beggars) to undertake work for the government, among other reforms. As far collection of land revenue is concerned, it was demanded in kind. The state regulated the prices. It can be stated that rice was sold for up to one rupee per kharwar (Wilson 1855: 281; Burnes et al. 1839: 155).

The amount of land revenue collected during Gulab Singh's reign was lower than that collected during Sikh rule. Moorcroft, who visited Kashmir in the 1820s, says that at least six percent of the cultivable land was lying barren because of the high taxation (Moorcroft & Trebeck 1841: 123-124). Moorcroft says: "Everywhere, however, the people are in the most abject condition; exorbitantly taxed by the Sikh government, and subjected to every kind of extortion and oppression

by its officers. The consequences of this system are, the gradual depopulation of the country: not more than about one-sixteenth of the cultivable surface is in cultivation, and the inhabitants starving at home, are driven in great numbers to the Plains of Hindustan. In like manner, the people of the city are rapidly thinning, though less from emigration, than poverty and disease: the prevalence of the latter in its most aggravated forms was fearfully extensive”.

In 1853, it was decided by the state that it would take only two parts out of the five parts, and the rest three parts would remain with the peasants (Youngusband 1996: 155, 173-174). Efforts were also made to bring the barren land under cultivation. If we analyse the total amount of revenue collected from different sources, it was worth Rupees 2430000, and the contribution of land revenue collected from peasants was worth Rupees 1200000, approximately 50 per cent of the total revenue. It increased to Rupees 8430000 during 1846-47 (Lai 1955: 39). Some of the critical agricultural products which was the more significant source of revenue for the state were Saffron, Silk or sericulture, Salt, Tea, Kuth (aromatic plant), tobacco and paper. The state regulated the cultivation of all these products (Youngusband 1996: 74).

Ladakh's economy was based on agriculture, which people produced for subsistence. The Gyalpo played an essential role in improving agriculture in Ladakh, and their main focus was to create awareness of region-specific cultivation. The state intervention also helped in bringing in desired changes in agriculture, and it increased the production of barley, which was exchanged for salt at Chang-Thang. Cropping patterns varied due to the exchange of farming knowledge among the numerous cultures that came together due to commerce. Various Ladakh productions are classified as mineral, vegetable and animal in Cunningham's reports from 1847. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was a transitional shift in the economic society, as people's engagement in local handicrafts and manufacturing increased due to several circumstances instigating its initiation from several locations in Ladakh.

A property tax and a tariff on merchandise were the two primary sources of revenue in Ladakh. The tax collection structure under the Gyalpo's authority was unique until the Dogra conquest. During Gyalpo's reign, the region's taxes were collected from households rather than lands because the land could not produce enough, and established revenue from such land was unavailable. Previously, the king was also a significant trader, and customs duties provided a significant portion of his income. A tariff levy was imposed on the import and export of wool merchandise, known as Shogam. Thob-

thang was the term for the revenue generated by such items. Taxes were known as Khral, Sha, or Thang in the local community.

Most inhabitants made income by transporting wool and other items to and from Yarkand and Kashmir through their region. When Knight arrived in Ladakh, he discovered that each villager was required to pay a tax to the Maharaja's treasury. The Maharaja collected a levy of Rupees 7 per year from each household. House taxes were set according to their size, ranging from Rupees 7 for a large house to Rs. 1 to 2 for a small one. From 1834 to 1947, the Dogras controlled Ladakh for 112 years. They switched their attention to the province's governance once peace was restored in 1840, inheriting the Ladakh Gyalpos' tax system. 18,000 dwellings were paying a total of Rupees 36,000 under the Gyalpos administration (J&K Gazetteer 1909: 236).

The gross revenue was roughly 70,700 rupees per year at the turn of the nineteenth century. The table below indicates the revenue from different sources:

Ladakh's revenue during the early Dogra reign was Rupees. 80,500 per year, with the tax on dwellings accounting for more than half of that. Most of the earnings went to civil and military administration, which accounted for more than half of the entire revenue, ranging from Rupees 50,000 to Rupees 60,000 every year.

Trade

The Industrial Revolution harmed India's traditional economy. Deindustrialisation and the collapse of cottage industries were the primary outcomes. The indigenous industry couldn't compete with the West's heavy industries. In the name of free commerce, the English imposed their will, ushering in an era of exploitation and economic drain. Until the Dogra Rule, Jammu Kashmir, on the other hand, was a closed economy. However, some academics argue that trade and commerce flourished during the Dogra period. The reason was that Jammu Kashmir's topography kept it distant from the exploiting arm of the British Empire; it could enjoy a thriving trade.

The three provinces of the state, mainly Jammu (1819), Ladakh (1834) and Kashmir (1846), had active trading linkages. Ladakh was the entry point for the goods and commodities coming from the northwestern part and central Asia. Jammu was the entry point for goods from the rest of India. This study will focus primarily on the internal trade between Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.

Trade between Kashmir and Jammu was being done through the

Banihal route. This route was better than the other route since it was opened around the year (Khuihami 1998: 269). Kashmir and Jammu were connected through places such as Banihal, Shahabad, and Anantnag. This route also connected other major cities such as Amritsar which was an important textile centre and helped the merchants and traders to transport their goods and commodities. This route was not motorable, and animals were used to transport goods (Drew 1997: 140). Agricultural products and manufactured articles were the significant trade between Kashmir and Jammu. Dying materials, Namdhas, hides, cotton clothes, leather, seeds, charas, wool, and fruits were some of the essential items traded (J&K Trade Reports 1964: 30-31). The goods manufactured by blacksmiths were also in high demand in Jammu. The items imported into Kashmir from Jammu were arms and ammunition, silver, etc.

Leh was an important centre of trade. It was situated at the central trade point between India and Yarkand. It was the meeting point for the traders from the countries like China and Russia (Talbot 1897: 45-48). Alexander Cunningham who visited Ladakh during the 1840s, says: "The chief source of wealth in Ladakh is the carrying-trade, or transport of foreign produce from one country to another through its own territories. This trade it owes entirely to its central situation between Kashmir and India on the south, and the Chinese provinces of Yarkand, Kotan, and Kashgar on the north. It is the entrepôt between Kashmir, where the shawls are manufactured, and the Chinese provinces of Ruthog and Chang-Thang, where the shawl wool is produced. It supplies north-western India with tea, shawls, wool, and borax; and the Musalmén provinces of China with opium, saffron, brocades, and shawls (Cunningham 1970: 241)."

Central Asian commodities were stored in Ladakh and then redistributed among Kashmiri and other Indian merchants. Similarly, it was a collection centre for traders from central Asia as they collected Indian commodities here. Kargil was the chief market of Baltistan as well as the administrative headquarters of Tehsil (J&K Foreign Department 1903: 490-502). Kargil was also an important centre during the Dogra period, and there were some aspects of continuity in past commercial practices. By 1848, the state-regulated the production and trade of essential commodities such as Iron manufacturing, wall nut, wheat, shawl, toilet boxes, pen cases and saffron (Lawrence 1848: 66-67). The merchants from Yarkand played an essential role in the Ladakh trade. Barter was the primary medium of trade during this period. Flour, barley and wheat were exported from Ladakh to Chang Thang and Lhasa. The Zamindars exchanged

tea, salt and wool instead of the abovementioned commodities. One of the benefits of this barter system was that the merchants were kept from their homeland for a more extended period to sell commodities (Caylay 1871: 550-597).

The trade between Srinagar and Ladakh was done through the Treaty High Road from Srinagar to Central Asia via Leh. The imports from Kashmir to Ladakh were finger rings, opium, saffron, rice, red pepper, raw tobacco, almonds, dry pot herbs, coarse white cotton clothes, Pattu, i.e. coarse woollen dyed green blue red chadar, Kaloha (Kashmiri Biscuits), Skull Caps (English Chintz) Kimkhab, i.e., Indian brocaded, Kafiri woollen scarfs, woollen and Pashmin etc. There is a long list of commodities which was imported from Ladakh. Jau, Tibetan, Mal and Dotsat carried on the trade. Ladakh exported Chinese tea and cups, Turkish felts, Chinese shawls, soda of nubra, sheep, goat, mangatdhan, kil pham, gold, silver, etc. to Kashmir.

Shawl was an essential item of trade during Gulab Singh's period. Cunningham says the Shawl-wool is exported to Kashmir, Nurpur, Amritsar, Lahore, Ludhiana, Ambala, Rampur on the Sutluj, and Nepal. To Rampur and Nepal, the wool was exported directly from Ruthog and Nagri, but Leh was the entrepot between the other shawl-marts and the wool-producing countries. In Leh, the wool was roughly cleaned, by which process it lost two-fifths of its weight. The picker received the hair as the price of his labour (Cunningham 1970: 215).

According to William Moorcroft (Moorcroft 1841), who visited Kashmir and the surrounding districts between 1819 and 1825, the annual quantity of shawl-wool imported varies between 500 and 1,000 horse-loads, each weighing about 300 pounds: the total weight of the Asali Tus does not surpass 1200 pounds. Previously, the wool was almost solely provided by the western provinces of Lassa and Laddakh, but, in recent years, significant quantities have been obtained from the vicinity of Yarkand, Khoten, and the families of the Great Kirghis horde. It was imported mainly by Mogol merchants, who exchanged it for handcrafted shawl goods in Kashmir, which they then sold in Russia at a profit.

The usual quantity of shawl-wool exported to Kashmir is around 800 loads, or 3,200 little maunds of sixteen seers each, as it was when Moorcroft visited, and roughly the same amount is exported to all other destinations during Ghulab Singh's period. The average price per seer in Ladakh is roughly two rupees, or Rs. 2,04000 (£20,400). Approximately 4,000 maunds of the 6,400 maunds shipped are

imported from Chang-thang, Ruthog, and Nagri, with the remaining 2,400 maunds coming from the highlands of Nubra, Ladakh, Zaskar, and Rukchu.

Between Leh and Kashmir, there was one fixed duty, of half a rupee per maund of sixteen seers; but in former days, before Gulab Sing acquired Kashmir, the duties, or exactions, were numerous and vexatious. The price of the wool increased by twenty per cent primarily because of the intervention at three different points by the traders, i.e., Ladakhi merchants, Kashmiri wool merchants, and finally, Kashmiri thread merchants (Cunningham 1970: 217), i.e. between producer and the manufacturer.

Trade Routes

The Dogra troops constantly traversed the different roads from Jammu to Leh during the first years of Zorawar Sing's occupation of Ladak, who later always took the route through Kishtwar and Zaskar in preference to the route through Kishtwar and Suru, which they thought was significantly longer. Cunningham talks about Dr Thomas Thomson, commissioner of the Tibetan frontier who travelled to Jammu. Cunningham says, that in 1848, Dr. Thomson travelled from Jammu to Leh, although he did it by the hilly path of Bhadarwah to Chatrgarh.

He had also travelled from Kashmir to Jammu in the same year. As a result, the route from Jammu to Leh through Zaskar and the Kashmir route can be compared. The contrast favours the route through Kashmir in terms of the ease with which it can cross the many passes, which are less lofty and much easier to ascend and descend than those on the other road. In terms of distance, the two highways are nearly identical. Dr Thomson's route is eighteen miles longer than Kashmir's, but, because the route from Zaskar to Leh, through Marka and Kiyo, is two days shorter than Dr. Thomson's, the two paths by Kashmir and Zaskar may be regarded as similar in length (Cunningham 1970: 150).

The Zaskar road runs straight from Jammu through Ramnagar to Bhadarwah, a distance of 73 miles. From there, it travels 116 miles through the Bhadri-Dhar Pass (10,165 feet) into the Chamba district and over the Saj-Joth (14,794 feet) into the Chandrabhaga Valley near Chatrgarh. The route from Chenab crosses the Bara Lacha range via the Umasi-Leh or Burdar Pass (18,125 feet) to Phadamn, Zaskar's main town, a distance of 90 kilometres. The road could be better and more challenging in this rugged terrain. It first follows the

Zaskar River until it reaches Chand-Li, which joins the mountains (Cunningham 1970: 150-151).

It falls quickly to the river, which it crosses via the Nira bridge, after passing over another mountain (16,495 feet) beyond Pangache. From there, it ascends the lofty mountains that border Zaskar on the west, crossing the Singge La (16,952 feet) into the Wanla area, where it follows the Wanla River to Lama Yurru, and finally to Leh, as in the original route. This road's high passes rarely open before June and are permanently closed by the end of October. Between Jammu and Leh, Dr Thomson travelled a total distance of 374 miles on this route. There are two additional ways to go to Leh from Phadam: a direct route through Zaskar and a winter route through Rukchu. The latter was taken by General Zorawar Sing, in the winter of 1835, when all the passes on the more direct road had long been closed (Cunningham 1970: 150-151).

The third important route is the southern road. The shawl wool is transported along this route to the main cities of Nurpur, Amritsar, and Ludhiana, where it is sold as produced shawls and coarse brocades. All these roads come together at Mandi (the market) or Maudinagur (market city) on the Byas River, the capital of the small state of the same name. Merchants travel from Nurpur to Kangra and Baijnath, from Amritsar to Hushiyarpoor and Nadon, and from Ludhiana to Ropar and Bilaspur; the first and last distances are approximately 120 miles; the second, approximately 150 miles. This route leads from Mandi to Sultanpur, the capital of Kullu, via the Kumin iron mines (Cunningham 1970: 152).

Cunningham argued that different routes from different sides led to Leh. The first was through Kashmir from Kabul and Punjab. The second route from Central Punjab via Jammu, Kishtwar and Zaskar led towards Leh. A branch of this road connected Zaskar with Leh through Rukchu. This route was known as Southwestern Road. The other route connected Lahore with Leh via Amritsar, Kullu, Lahaul and Rukchu. Bisahar was also connected with this route at Rukchu via Spiti. This route was known as Southern Road. The following route was the Indus to Leh via the south-eastern road from Lhasa to Garo, at Garo, a branch road from India connected to this road via the Niti pass. The eastern road to Leh runs through Chinese territory, passing via Rudok and the Chushul and Sakti valleys. The northern road connects Yarkand and Khotan with Leh, passing through the Karakoram Mountain range and along the Shyaok and Nubra Rivers. The previous route, which was closed due to a glacier damming the stream, followed the Shyok from its source to Saser, and then either

continued down that river or crossed the mountains and down the Nubra to Leh. The road from Balti to Leh passes through the Shyok and Indus rivers.

Conclusion

Gulab Singh's era is a pivotal period in Indian history, marked by its profound impact on the nation's northern boundaries, as enshrined in ancient texts like the Puranas. Gulab Singh expanded these boundaries during his reign by annexing significant regions, including Mansarovar and Gilgit Baltistan. However, his legacy extends beyond territorial expansion, encompassing significant contributions to the economic development of his state through a series of transformative reforms. One of Gulab Singh's notable accomplishments was establishing a uniform taxation system. This reform streamlined the fiscal apparatus, promoting economic stability and equitable resource distribution. Additionally, Gulab Singh recognised the potential of the shawl industry in the region and accorded it due prominence. This decision not only fostered economic growth but also nurtured local craftsmanship, contributing to the region's cultural richness.

Another critical initiative Gulab Singh undertook was integrating Ladakh's economy. He encouraged collaboration among the Gyalpos, fostering cooperation and synergy among the region's economic actors. Remarkably, Gulab Singh refrained from interfering in the agricultural practices of the peasantry. Farmers were granted the liberty to cultivate crops of their choice, exemplifying a progressive and inclusive approach to governance. However, this approach could have sat better with the British, who sought greater regional control and influence. Consequently, they dispatched agents to interfere in various developmental initiatives, especially in Ladakh. Despite British attempts at meddling, Gulab Singh managed to minimise their impact. Had he not done so, the fate of his state could have mirrored that of other provinces, where oppressive British policies often led to severe famines and economic hardship.

A harmonious blend of territorial expansion and economic development characterised Gulab Singh's rule. His forward-thinking reforms left an indelible mark on the region, fostering prosperity and cultural vibrancy. Moreover, his ability to resist excessive British interference ensured the continued well-being of his state. Gulab Singh's legacy continues to be celebrated as a pivotal chapter in Indian history, embodying the ideals of progress, inclusivity, and self-determination.

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