

BRITISH INDIRECT RULE AND FRONTIER GOVERNANCE IN THE GILGIT AGENCY (1901–1935): POLITICAL AUTHORITY, ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL, AND IMPERIAL STRATEGY

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Abstract

In the early 20th century, the Gilgit Agency was situated on the northern border of British India, which was a strategically significant area. The area of Jammu and Kashmir, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan and the Central Asian region lay between the areas and so the area of Gilgit became an important focus point of British frontier policies. Local political developments in the region, as well as imperial interests in the security of the northern frontier and the course of events in Central Asia, had a significant impact on British involvement. Instead of direct colonial rule, the British adopted an indirect rule system, whereby the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir had formal authority but British political officials were more and more dominant in frontier affairs. This article explores the British indirect rule and frontier governance in Gilgit Agency from 1901 to 1935 under the lens of political authority, administrative set-up, interaction with local rulers, military arrangements, infrastructure, intelligence and imperial strategy. It maintains that British control was a gradual one, and not achieved by the annexation of the territories. The British Political Agent was the key means of imperial control, and local rulers were left in place and woven into a broader system of British frontier administration. The study also asserts that the lease of the Gilgit Wazarat to the British Government of India in 1935 was an extension of this earlier system and not a new one. By 1935, the British political, military and administrative control had spread far enough to permit the introduction of formal administrative control without the local political structures being completely eliminated. The Gilgit case is thus illustrative of the ways in which indirect rule might be applied as a flexible tool of empire in a strategically challenging, politically precarious frontier terrain.

Introduction

The story of the Gilgit Agency is a telling one of how the British Empire ruled strategically important frontier areas without necessarily

implementing traditional direct colonial rule. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gilgit became a political and military borderland where British influences met the authority of the

Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, and the power of local rulers. Its geographical position made it important also on account of its comparatively small economic resources, as it lay on the road to Central Asia and opened up on to the ways to Afghanistan, the Pamirs and Chinese Turkestan. (Chohan, 1984; Government of India, 1909)

British policy in Gilgit was closely linked with the broader strategic issues of the British Indian Empire. The growth in Russia's power in Central Asia kept alarming Britain about the safety of the northern routes to India. This made Gilgit a part of a wider frontier policy of transforming political intelligence, local alliances, military organization and control of strategic routes into playing an important role in imperial security. (Chohan, 1984; Huttenback, 1975)

The British were not just going to invade and take over, replacing local leaders. British administrators, however, devised a set of plans that would allow for the continuation of the current political system, but would progressively take away the autonomy of these states. The resultant system was a fusion of British political control and Dogra sovereignty and local political institutions. This accommodation was an important form of indirect colonial rule, as the exercise of power was through institutions that were formally not all British. (Chohan, 1984; Sökefeld, 2005)

Of special significance is the time of 1901–35, when the system was consolidated. The British presence grew in these decades, via the Political Agent, frontier administration, military organisation, communications, intelligence and relations with local rulers. The eventual lease to the British Government of India of the Gilgit Wazarat in 1935 illustrates the extent of the development of this process. (Bangash, 2010; Chohan, 1984)

This article, therefore, reviews the changing nature of British rule in Gilgit from 1901 to 1935. It addresses the issue of the interplay between formal sovereignty and effective power, and upholds the idea that British frontier

governance involved a hybrid of indirect political control, local cooperation and strategic intervention. It also shows the 1935 lease was a culmination of a long course of imperial penetration and not simply an administrative move. (Bangash, 2010; Sökefeld, 2005)

Literature Review

British Frontier Policy and Imperial Security

British frontier policy in the northern parts of India was based on the idea that the security of the British Empire was as much political as military and that it would require influence beyond the formal boundaries of British India. The importance of Gilgit within this context was that it opened the way to the high mountain passes leading to Kashmir, Chitral, the Pamirs and Central Asia. According to Mehra (1988) the British became more interested in Kashmir's northern borders because imperial officials began to worry about the political instability and the expansion of the Russians beyond the Himalayas. The importance of his work lies in its linkage of the Agency with the overall defense policy of British India, but it does not pay as much attention to the internal administrative arrangements by which British authority was exercised in the Agency itself.

Hopkirk (1990) and Johnson (2006) also demonstrate that the Great Game involved more than just overt military competition. It also relied on intelligence gathering, exploration, route mapping, political reporting and diplomatic observation. With this view of things, Gilgit was not just a remote mountain territory but an intelligence front. The larger imperial context is, however, primarily addressed in these studies. They contribute to the comprehension of the strategic importance of the city of Gilgit, but are not a comprehensive account of the organisation of British rule through the Political Agent, local rulers, military institutions and communication networks from 1901 to 1935.

Indirect Rule and Colonial Governance

The concept of indirect rule is important when it comes to the understanding of the British rule in Gilgit. British colonial administration frequently involved re-constituting established political systems in ways that met the needs of the British imperial system (Metcalf 1995). In many localities, colonial rule was not so much established as maintained by acting through the local institutions recognized, supervised, and made dependent. This is the point which can be useful for the case of Gilgit as the British did not do away with Dogra sovereignty or the local princely authority. Rather, they kept these structures in place and slowly under British control.

Copland (1997) also shows that princely states were not entirely autonomous places. They had ceremonial and internal power but their political powers were sometimes constrained by British paramountcy. The Gilgit Agency was impacted by this argument because the British Political Agent had de facto authority over frontier affairs, whereas the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir had legal authority. The overall literature on indirect rule and princely states, however, has not properly explored the peculiar case of Gilgit as a frontier agency where British rule was exercised over the Kashmir Darbar and the local rulers concurrently.

The Gilgit Agency in Frontier Historiography

Chohan's *The Gilgit Agency, 1877-1935* continues to be one of the most germane studies on the administrative and political history of the area. The details given by Chohan (1984) are of great significance with regard to the formation of the Agency, the participation of British officers, interactions with Hunza and Nagar and the evolution of the frontier administration. His study is particularly valuable in that it offers a political history of Gilgit, instead of just a history of imperial rivalry. It is a basis for the development of British impact prior to the lease in 1935.

Dani (2001) brings a broader regional context when he situates Gilgit in the historical context of the northern areas. His writing illuminates the older political structures, local rulers and regional identities that influenced British policy. But neither Chohan nor Dani's analytical model of British indirect rule in Gilgit from 1901 to 1935 is fully developed. Chohan's contribution is administrative detail, Dani's is historical context. The aim of this study is both to extend these and to investigate the operation of British power in the context of multi-layered sovereignty, political oversight, local intermediaries, military structure, communication and intelligence.

Methodology

The method adopted in this study is qualitative historical research to study the indirect rule and frontier governance in Gilgit Agency during 1901-1935 in British rule. The sources of research are mostly documentary and archival sources such as Amar Singh Chohan's *The Gilgit Agency, 1877-1935*, secondary source work of Yaqoob Khan Bangash on the political status of Gilgit, Military Report and Gazetteer of the Gilgit Agency and other secondary sources. It studies the British administrative management, the functioning of the Political Agent, relationship with local rulers, military organization, infrastructure, intelligence gathering and the lease of 1935 in Gilgit. The collected material is then thematically analysed to gain an insight into the gradual shift from indirect to more direct forms of political control over the British. Collected material is then analysed thematically to gain an insight into the gradual shift from indirect to more direct forms of political control over the British.

Historical and Geopolitical Background

The geographical location contained the political importance of Gilgit. The region was a part of a front mountainous area which linked the territories of Jammu and Kashmir with roads opening towards the Hindu Kush, Pamirs and

Central Asia. The situation of its development would have a bearing on British thinking about Afghanistan and Russian Central Asia and the Chinese areas to the north and east. (Chohan, 1984; Government of India, 1909)

During the nineteenth century the significance of the region grew as British and Russian interests built up in Central Asia. British authorities feared that Russian power could move closer to the North border of India. Thus, Gilgit was considered as an important site to watch political activity and movement from which across the border. This strategic calculation was manifested in the establishment and development of the Gilgit Agency. (Chohan, 1984; Huttenback, 1975)

Practical problems of frontier administration had an impact on the British approach to frontier administration. The harsh terrain, poor communications, and weak political structure of the region proved to make traditional "bureaucratic" administration expensive. A system of political officers, local rulers and locally recruited forces provided the British with a more flexible way of exerting influence. (Chohan, 1984) The British also noted that local leaders had political legitimacy and expertise that was not available on the outside. British policy never aimed at destroying these rulers, but rather to incorporate them into the imperial political system. Local political autonomy could then be maintained and the external and strategic aspects of its authority could be managed by British officials. (Chohan, 1984; Sökefeld, 2005)

The Administrative Situation after 1901

During the early twentieth century the Gilgit administration became a highly complex system. There was no single British province in the region. Rather, various territories were governed by various political and administrative structures, with multiple relationships between the British Government of India and state rulers and local authorities in Jammu and Kashmir. (Chohan, 1984) The Gilgit Wazarat was formally attached

to the Jammu and Kashmir State and the British Political Agency (BPA) had a strong political presence in the neighboring frontier areas. This established a difference between de jure and de facto rule. The Maharaja's role was acknowledged, and the British began to take over more aspects of business deemed to be of strategic significance to the Imperial Government. (Bangash, 2010; Chohan, 1984)

It may be seen as a dual or layered administration. The government did not have the authority over everything; there was a variety of government authorities and their different levels of jurisdiction. Within this framework the British Political Agent was the main spokesperson for British interests, and the Dogra officials the formal representatives of the Maharaja. (Chohan, 1984)

This system would make it possible for the British to run the administration of the frontier without taking the full financial and political burden and responsibility of direct rule. The agreement was thus both sensible and cost-effective. It enabled British authorities to focus their efforts on security, political intelligence and frontier management whilst many routine tasks were delegated to pre-existing institutions. (Chohan, 1984; Sökefeld, 2005)

The Political Agent and British Political Authority

The British Political Agent emerged as the main player in the operation of the Gilgit Agency. He was not just a diplomat, he had to deal with politics, security at the frontiers, intelligence, communication with local rulers and liaison with military authorities. The office then became the key tool for the implementation of British power. (Chohan, 1984)

The Political Agent had direct linkages with the local rulers and political elites. The significance of these relationships lies in the fact that a lot of the administration on the frontier was through negotiation, and it was very much based on personal political networks. British officials required intelligence on local conflicts, tribal

relations, trails, political allegiance and activity beyond the frontier. (Government of India, 1909; Chohan, 1984)

The Political Agent was also the link between the local administration and the Government of India. Communications could be made through this office about issues of politics, security and local rulers, enabling the British administration to keep a close eye on the frontier without having to employ a large bureaucracy. (Government of India, 1909)

This centralization of power made for a high degree of influence for the Political Agent in local affairs. His authority was different in different regions but as a result of his role he was able to influence political relationships and the impact of British strategic priorities in the local context. It thus exemplifies the 'personalised' nature of British frontier administration. (Chohan, 1984)

British Indirect Rule and Local Rulers

Local rulers were an integral part of British rule in the northern frontier and were preserved. The British did not completely outlaw the Mirs and Rajas but rather integrated them into a political hierarchy. They were not always denied their traditional status, but were stepped upon more and more politically by British supervision. (Chohan, 1984)

The rulers of the frontier territories of Hunza, Nagar and so on were especially significant as they had pre-existing authority in their communities. British officials had the existing political systems at their disposal to ensure order, to convey their decisions and to control their populations. This minimized the necessity to intervene directly with bureaucracy. (Chohan, 1984; Bangash, 2010)

The regime did, however, alter the nature of local political power. A ruler might be able to maintain traditional legitimacy, but at the same time grow more and more reliant on British recognition and protection. Political power was thus not abolished but subsumed, re-arranged in a colonial hierarchy. (Sökefeld, 2005)

This deal also gave the Brits political benefits. There was a possibility of intermediaries between the people and the colonial government, and British officials could step in selectively when local politics were seen as a threat to the British interest. Indirect rule thus brought both legitimacy and imperial control to the local level. (Chohan, 1984)

British Rule and Dogra Authority

It is a cooperative and conflictual relationship between the British and the Dogra administration. The British strategic interests were to increase their influence on the northern frontier, and the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir actually had formal sovereignty over the state including the territories of Gilgit. (Bangash, 2010; Chohan, 1984)

The British authorities often criticised the Dogra rule. Questions about taxes, forced labor, local government and political relations helped to shape British views that direct British control would result in a more stable situation. Meanwhile, however, the British did not take the decision to incorporate the entire kingdom as they did not feel it was necessary. (Chohan, 1984) The arrangement was thus purposely ill-defined. British government might have argued that it was functioning within the political structure of Jammu and Kashmir and at the same time had significant control on strategic issues. This obscurity allowed the British to grow without having to face the legal and political repercussions of annexation at once. (Bangash, 2010)

The relationship is a test case for the critical aspect of imperial frontier rule: the separation of sovereignty and effective power. There was a possibility of the formal sovereignty being held by a princely ruler but the practical strategic control increasing with the British officials. (Bangash, 2010; Sökefeld, 2005)

Military Security and the Gilgit Scouts

One of the major components of British frontier government was military security. The British had decided that they needed to keep a locally reliable security force, as the geography of Gilgit made it difficult to get reinforcements from the plains in a timely fashion. The knowledge of the local area was therefore a valuable military asset. (Chohan, 1984) Eventually local recruitment led to the formation of the Gilgit Scouts in 1913. The Scouts brought in British troops from the population and functioned under British command. (Chohan, 1984).

Beyond military operations, the importance of the Scouts was felt. Local hires had local knowledge which British officers could benefit from, including knowledge of terrain, routes, communities, and political relationships. They were thus able to enhance security and intelligence capabilities. (Chohan, 1984; Government of India, 1909)

The Gilgit Scouts also embodied indirect rule in general. British troops were not solely British but recruited from outside. In place of only British or external soldiers, the British used local soldiers in their security forces. This enabled the local knowledge to work alongside the central military command. (Chohan, 1984).

Roads, Communications and Frontier Infrastructure

Civilian consequences and military consequences of the development of infrastructure. Improved communication would aid in movement and trade, but it also would enable the government to better move military personnel and administrative officers. The state was thus better able to reach remote areas through infrastructure. (Government of India, 1909)

British geographical and military reports also show the value placed on the acquisition of knowledge of routes, passes and settlements. This enabled administrator to pinpoint areas of strategic importance and to devise political and

military responses to whatever might happen along the frontier. (Government of India, 1909) Infrastructure thus became an aspect of a larger state-making process. Roads, reports, surveys and communication systems made the frontier into a territory that was more easily watched and controlled by a relatively small colonial presence. (Chohan, 1984)

Knowledge, Surveys and Colonial Governance

Another critical tool used in the process of British rule was the creation of geographical and political knowledge. British officials were able to produce reports and gazetteers describing the geography, population, political organization, languages, routes and economic conditions of the area. These documents contributed to the conversion of local knowledge to administrative information. (Government of India, 1909)

This larger process of the production of colonial knowledge is captured in the Military Report and Gazetteer of the Gilgit Agency. The purpose of such reports was not just to describe the country but to give information that would be of use for administration and military planning as well as political evaluation. (Government of India, 1909)

Local knowledge was particularly necessary as British government officials had to appreciate the political dynamics between rulers, tribes and villages. Classification and documentation enabled administrators to pinpoint influential people and evaluate possible sources of instability. (Government of India, 1909; Chohan, 1984)

The production of knowledge thus helped to reinforce colonial power. Mapping, reporting and classification diminished the ambiguities of governing a challenging territory and helped the British to make political decisions based on systematic collection of information. (Chohan, 1984)

The Great Game and Imperial Strategy

The broader strategic context continued to be a significant factor influencing British policy in

Gilgit. British officials saw the northern frontier in terms of Central Asian developments and the potential for Russian influence to creep closer to British India. The town of Gilgit thus assumed importance as one of the components of a broader imperial security network. (Chohan, 1984; Huttenback, 1975). The strategic importance of the territory of the town of Gilgit was not restricted to the town itself. Its value was linked to the routes and passes around it and to it being an observation point to look towards Central Asia. British officials thus tried to make it difficult for any other power to become a competitor for political control of the area. (Chohan, 1984).

The Great Game paradigm also affected the British view of local politics. Conflicts on a local level could be seen as strategic if the British authorities felt that instability could open up opportunities for outside interference. This led to tight political control and a desire to retain British authority over rulers on the frontiers. (Huttenback, 1975; Chohan, 1984)

British frontier government was, therefore, both local and imperial. Political actions regarding rulers, roads, conscription of soldiers, administrative arrangements, were linked to a much wider scheme aimed at defending Britain's northern approaches. (Chohan, 1984).

The Transformation of Indirect Rule

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the indirect rule system had led to significant British influence on the northern frontier. The British had established political connections with the local rulers, improved military security and gained administrative knowledge of the area. This meant that they had much more influence than their formal constitutionality allowed them to have. (Chohan, 1984)

This change didn't result in the instant cancellation of local government services, though. Instead, their political sphere became more and more bound within a framework created by the British officials. Local rulers remained significant

and their functions were limited only by British strategic priorities. (Sökefeld, 2005). The distinction between political control and administration also became less significant with the gradual increase of British influence. Formal administrative control was logical as British officials gained a wide influence over security, communications and external relations. (Bangash, 2010)

The condition was set in place for the system to change. Indirect rule was a good idea in the beginning because it cut administrative expenses and maintained local legitimacy, but as the needs of strategy grew, so did the British desire to exert more direct control over the most significant areas of the frontier. (Chohan, 1984; Bangash, 2010).

The 1935 Gilgit Lease

The turning point was in 1935 when British Government of India leased the Gilgit Wazarat for sixty years from Maharaja Hari Singh. This led to the British taking direct control of the leased area while the Maharaja's sovereignty was kept intact. (Bangash, 2010) The lease marked a crucial shift in the formal/informal power dynamic. The lease gave the British a more direct administrative role in the heart of the Gills territory, as opposed to earlier British control via a political role and indirect methods. (Bangash, 2010)

The 1935 arrangement must not, however, be considered as a sudden change. This was the result of years of British involvement in the area. Political agency, local alliances, military organization, intelligence gathering and infrastructure had already established a strong British presence before the lease was concluded. (Chohan, 1984; Bangash, 2010)

The lease was thus the result of British strategic penetration. It transformed the prevalent system of political influence into a formal arrangement of administrative control, and continued the constitutional fiction that the area was part of the Jammu and Kashmir State. (Bangash, 2010).

Why Indirect Rule Was Effective in Gilgit

The indirect system of rule in Britain was well suited to the geographical and political situation of Gilgit. The rugged landscapes and high costs of direct bureaucratic rule impeded direct administration, and local rulers were already politically legitimate and knew their communities well. These structures allowed the British to lighten the administrative load on frontier administration. (Chohan, 1984). The military manpower available in the region was another advantage for the system. The Gilgit Scouts were a vital link between the local community and the British security forces, enabling the British to harness local expertise yet retain control. (Chohan, 1984).

Another source of strength were political relationships. In addition, British officials established links with local leaders and political elite that would allow them to mediate conflicts and intervene in some cases, but not in all. (Chohan, 1984). Thus, the effectiveness of the system rested on two factors: coercion and collaboration, political patronage and military organization and knowledge production. There were not just a single set of institutions that kept the British in power, but a series of interwoven mechanisms. (Sökefeld, 2005; Chohan, 1984).

Contradictions of British Frontier Governance

British indirect rule was effective, but was always fraught with contradictions. The British claimed to recognize the sovereignty of the Maharaja and steadily curtailed his de facto powers in the Northern frontier. In a similar fashion local rulers continued to exist but became more and more beholden to British political agendas. (Bangash, 2010)

The colonial government was thus able to maintain the façade of local autonomy while retaining significant external control. A formal-practical power relationship was a key element of indirect rule. It enabled the British to avoid the full annexation of the territory that they had

sought, but also to achieve their strategic goals. (Sökefeld, 2005)

The notion of administrative improvement, as put forward by the British, also needs to be critically analysed. Colonial authorities had a tendency to compare the performance of their government with its own notions of inadequacy in the Dogra administration, but British action was focused mainly on imperial security and not on democratic participation or political empowerment of the local population. (Chohan, 1984)

The Gilgit case is therefore a case study in the need not to think of indirect rule as being a form of limited colonial interference. Instead, it was a way in which colonial power could act through existing institutions, albeit in a way that would progressively alter their role and purpose in politics. (Sökefeld, 2005).

Discussion

It appears that British rule in Gilgit, from 1901 to 1935, was not a single and complete direct rule but, in fact, a more complex form of indirect rule, in which the British maintained some autonomy. It was a combination of several layers of administration on the frontier. The Maharaja continued to hold formal sovereignty, the local rulers held traditional offices, and British officials gained increasing strategic and political control. It was the Political Agent who played a key role in this arrangement as he acted as a link between the British Government of India and the local rulers, military forces and Dogra administration. This institution allowed the British strategic priorities to be realised without establishing a regular colonial administration throughout the frontier.

The hybridity of British rule is once more illustrated in the development of the Gilgit Scouts. The population was brought into a military unit for the security of the empire, and the military kept under British control. Military organization thus indirectly embodied local involvement and colonial domination. The lease

of 1935 contained a similar declaration that the British system had slowly been transferred into direct control. With a sufficient amount of political influence in the form of administration and military force, the formal control of the core Gilgit area could be achieved without disrupting the broader network of local political relations.

Conclusion

British frontier rule in the Gilgit Agency 1901–1935 was founded on a sophisticated indirect rule framework of formal Dogra rule and increasing British political control. The British didn't pervasively strive to replace all local institutions, but rather collaborate with local rulers and political systems to further imperial security interests.

This system was institutionalized through the British Political Agent. The Political Agent assisted the British in translating strategic interests into reality, supervised politics, gathered information, met local chiefs and organized security considerations.

The development of the Gilgit Scouts, improvement of communications and production of geographical and political knowledge further strengthened British control. They facilitated the effective functioning of the colonial government in a challenging mountainous area with a comparatively small administrative presence.

It was therefore the result of a long process and not just an overnight decision made in 1935. When the British took direct rule over the leased territory they had already secured a strong political, military and administrative presence in the area. The Gilgit experience provides an illustration of the adaptability of British imperial rule. Indirect rule allowed the British to gain local legitimacy and combine that with imperial authority, maintain political structures, limit autonomy, and achieve strategic goals without taking full responsibility for territories on the spot. Thus, the history of Gilgit between 1901 and 1935 offers a good example of the deployment of colonial power in the form of

political negotiations, military mobilisations, administrative knowledge and strategic moves.

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