



The North-Western Frontier Policy of Maharaja Gulab Singh: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was founded by Maharaja Gulab Singh (1792–1857), who was instrumental in establishing his kingdom's North-Western boundary policy. Maintaining a buffer zone between the Sikh Empire, the growing British Empire, and the unstable tribal areas of the northwest was at the core of his geopolitical concept. Gulab Singh concentrated on maintaining his borders after gaining control of Jammu under the Sikh Empire in 1820 and then gaining Kashmir through the Treaty of Amritsar (1846). The three main goals of his program were military fortification, diplomatic wrangling, and territory expansion. In order to solidify control over trade routes and guarantee economic prosperity, he expanded his dominance over Ladakh (1834) and Baltistan (1840).

He continued to pursue a policy of cautious diplomacy to confront threats from outside parties such as the British, Afghans, and Sikh remnants. He made sure his northern borders could be defended against any intruders while promising the British his allegiance. In order to defend and extend the borders, especially in Tibet and the Gilgit-Baltistan region, the Maharaja also sent Dogra generals like Zorawar Singh. Despite these initiatives, there were ongoing difficulties because of the unstable North-West frontier and British geopolitical interests. Even after his rule, Gulab Singh's actions continued to shape the political climate in the area and established the groundwork for Jammu and Kashmir's territorial integrity.

Keywords: geopolitical, British Empire, integrity.

Introduction

The north-western frontier of the Indian subcontinent has historically functioned as both a gateway and a battleground. Its significance lies not only in its strategic location but also in its cultural and political complexity. In the mid-nineteenth century, this frontier became an arena of calculated policy and tactical negotiation under the stewardship of Maharaja Gulab Singh, the founder of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. His frontier policy was a blend of military prudence, political acumen, and strategic alliance-building, which helped maintain the territorial integrity of his newly founded kingdom amid regional upheavals and British imperial designs.¹

Maharaja Gulab Singh's approach to the north-western frontier must be viewed within the broader context of his rise under the Lahore Darbar, his experiences during the First Anglo-Sikh War, and his subsequent ascension as an independent ruler through the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846.² His policies were not merely defensive but aimed at creating a buffer between the powerful British Indian Empire to the south and the volatile regions of the north-west that included Gilgit, Baltistan, and the tribal zones bordering Afghanistan.³

This paper seeks to examine the north-western frontier policy of Maharaja Gulab Singh by analysing its origins, objectives, implementation, and long-term consequences. It will explore how Gulab Singh managed to secure and stabilize the frontier through a mix of military expeditions, diplomatic negotiations, and political subterfuge. The

¹ Grewal, J. S. (1990). *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (p. 182). Cambridge University Press.

² Lamb, A. (1991). *Kashmir: A disputed legacy, 1846–1990* (pp. 30–32). Roxford Books.

³ Bakshi, S. R. (1999). *Kashmir through ages* (pp. 45–47). Sarup & Sons.



study also contextualizes his actions within the larger framework of British frontier policy and imperial strategy, assessing the legacy of his governance in shaping the northern boundaries of the Indian subcontinent.⁴

Historical Background of the North-Western Frontier

The north-western frontier of India, encompassing regions such as Gilgit, Baltistan, Ladakh, and parts of present-day Pakistan-administered territories, has long been a region of geopolitical turbulence and cultural intersections. Historically, this area served as a corridor for invasions, migrations, and trade between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.⁵ Empires from the Achaemenids and Kushans to the Mughals and Afghans traversed and contested this corridor. By the early 19th century, the region remained fragmented and contested, characterized by tribal autonomy, shifting allegiances, and weak centralized control.⁶

Before Maharaja Gulab Singh's consolidation, the region was part of a loosely administered frontier zone under the dominion of the Sikh Empire ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.⁷ However, the effective control of these areas was often nominal, with real power held by local chieftains and governors who operated with considerable autonomy.⁸ The remoteness of the terrain, combined with harsh climatic conditions and difficult topography, made consistent governance a formidable challenge.

Ladakh and Baltistan, in particular, had distinct historical and cultural trajectories. Ladakh, once an independent kingdom with strong Buddhist traditions, came under Dogra control in the early 1840s after a series of military expeditions led by General Zorawar Singh under the aegis of Gulab Singh.⁹ Baltistan, with its Islamic character and proximity to the Karakoram ranges, similarly witnessed military interventions and administrative integration into Gulab Singh's domain.¹⁰ These campaigns not only expanded the territorial reach of Gulab Singh but also brought him into direct contact with the sensitive frontiers adjoining Central Asia and Xinjiang.

The importance of this frontier became even more pronounced in light of the 'Great Game'—the strategic rivalry between the British and Russian empires over influence in Central Asia.¹¹ While Russia extended its control southward, the British sought to create a series of buffer states along the north-western periphery of India. Within this context, Maharaja Gulab Singh's dominion, occupying the northernmost tip of the subcontinent, assumed critical strategic importance.¹² His role thus evolved beyond that of a regional chieftain to a frontier ruler whose policies had far-reaching implications for regional stability and imperial calculations.

Gulab Singh's north-western frontier policy, therefore, must be understood as a response to both inherited geographical realities and emerging imperial dynamics. His efforts to control and pacify this region were not just

⁴ Talbot, I. (1998). *Punjab and the Raj: The frontier and the politics of British India* (pp. 210–215). Sang-e-Meel Publications.

⁵ Dani, A. H. (2001). *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* (p. 22). Sang-e-Meel Publications.

⁶ Sheikh, M. A. (1995). *The Jammu and Kashmir dispute: A historical perspective* (pp. 12–15). University of Kashmir Press.

⁷ Grewal, J. S. (1990). *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (pp. 170–175). Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Zutshi, C. (2014). *Languages of belonging: Islam, regional identity, and the making of Kashmir* (p. 58). C. Hurst & Co.

⁹ Dewan, R. K. (1999). *The Dogras of Jammu and Kashmir* (pp. 35–40). Gulshan Publishers.

¹⁰ Rai, M. K. (2004). *Kashmir under Dogra rule* (pp. 72–75). Jay Kay Books.

¹¹ Hopkirk, P. (1990). *The Great Game: The struggle for empire in Central Asia* (pp. 119–123). Kodansha International.

¹² Lamb, A. (1991). *Kashmir: A disputed legacy, 1846–1990* (pp. 35–40). Oxford Books.



acts of expansionism but deliberate strategies aimed at securing his kingdom's vulnerable frontiers while asserting sovereignty in an area of great strategic consequence.¹³

Strategic Objectives of Maharaja Gulab Singh's Frontier Policy

Maharaja Gulab Singh's frontier policy was deeply rooted in strategic necessity, informed by his understanding of the geopolitical significance of the north-western frontier and shaped by the volatile political climate of the mid-nineteenth century. Upon assuming sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir in 1846, Gulab Singh was immediately confronted with the challenge of stabilizing a vast and heterogeneous kingdom that bordered Central Asia, the Punjab, and British India. His strategic objectives in this context were multifaceted: to protect the territorial integrity of his nascent state, to contain internal dissent and external aggression, and to position his kingdom as a stabilizing buffer between competing imperial interests.¹⁴

One of Gulab Singh's primary objectives was to ensure the security of his frontiers from both internal threats—such as rebellious tribes and semi-autonomous chieftains—and external incursions from Central Asian warlords and Afghan factions. The mountainous terrain of Gilgit and Baltistan, while offering natural defence, also rendered communication and control difficult, necessitating a proactive policy of military expansion and fortification.¹⁵ In this regard, the deployment of Dogra forces under trusted generals like Zorawar Singh was instrumental in extending Dogra authority and neutralizing potential threats before they could reach the heartland of Jammu and Kashmir.

Another strategic goal was to consolidate and integrate diverse frontier territories into the administrative and political framework of the Dogra state. These areas—ethnically, religiously, and culturally distinct from the Jammu plains—required a delicate mix of coercion and co-optation. Gulab Singh pursued a policy of appointing loyal governors, establishing forts, and extracting nominal allegiance through local intermediaries to ensure the loyalty of frontier populations while minimizing the cost of direct rule.¹⁶ This enabled him to establish a semblance of centralized authority in a region historically marked by decentralization.

A third objective, closely tied to the evolving imperial dynamics of the period, was to establish the state of Jammu and Kashmir as a neutral buffer in the broader canvas of the "Great Game" between Britain and Russia. Gulab Singh was acutely aware of his kingdom's geostrategic location. He therefore adopted a foreign policy that emphasized cooperation with the British, while simultaneously reinforcing his autonomy and control over northern territories. By acting as a bulwark against Russian advances and tribal disruptions from the northwest, Gulab Singh offered strategic utility to the British, which in turn safeguarded his position and deterred direct imperial intervention.¹⁷

In sum, the strategic objectives of Maharaja Gulab Singh's frontier policy were not merely driven by immediate military imperatives, but were underpinned by a sophisticated understanding of geography, imperial politics, and statecraft. His calculated approach laid the groundwork for the stability and endurance of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir well into the twentieth century.

Military and Diplomatic Measures on the Frontier

¹³ Talbot, I. (1998). *Punjab and the Raj: The frontier and the politics of British India* (pp. 220–225). Sang-e-Meel Publications.

¹⁴ Zutshi, C. (2014). *Kashmir's contested past* (pp. 60–62). Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Moorcroft, W., & Trebeck, G. (1841). *Travels in the Himalayan provinces* (Vol. II, pp. 195–200). John Murray.

¹⁶ Rai, M. K. (2004). *Kashmir under Dogra rule* (pp. 80–83). Jay Kay Books.

¹⁷ Hasan, M. (2002). *The Kashmir question: Retrospect and prospect* (pp. 19–22). Oxford University Press.



Maharaja Gulab Singh's consolidation of the north-western frontier relied on a calculated combination of military expeditions and diplomatic engagements. Recognizing that sheer force alone could not secure such a vast and complex terrain, he balanced coercion with negotiation, subjugation with conciliation, and occupation with co-option. His frontier policy, thus, reflected a sophisticated understanding of realpolitik tailored to the unique challenges of a volatile and ethnically diverse region.

The military campaigns led by General Zorawar Singh were central to Gulab Singh's territorial ambitions. Often described as one of the most audacious military figures in the Dogra administration, Zorawar Singh spearheaded successful expeditions into Ladakh (1834–1840), Baltistan (1840), and western Tibet (1841), significantly expanding Dogra influence.¹⁸ The Ladakh campaign was particularly decisive, leading to the eventual annexation of the region and its incorporation into Gulab Singh's dominion. Zorawar Singh's military successes were not just acts of conquest but were intended to secure critical mountain passes and trade routes that connected Kashmir with Central Asia.¹⁹

However, military engagements were not always successful. The Tibet campaign of 1841 ended in disaster when Zorawar Singh was killed in battle near Taklakot during a harsh winter. The defeat underscored the risks of overextension and the logistical challenges of frontier warfare in high-altitude regions.²⁰ Yet, the very fact that such a campaign was launched underscores the Dogra state's frontier ambition and its willingness to assert sovereignty even in remote borderlands.

In parallel with military expansion, diplomacy played a crucial role in managing the frontier. Gulab Singh understood the importance of negotiating with local rulers, tribal leaders, and neighbouring powers. He often extended political patronage or recognized limited local autonomy in exchange for loyalty or tribute. This approach minimized resistance and allowed for indirect control over difficult territories.²¹ In Gilgit, for instance, he appointed local governors known as wazirs under the nominal control of the Dogra state while allowing tribal chiefs to maintain influence—a practice that ensured administrative functionality without igniting rebellion.²²

Gulab Singh also maintained diplomatic ties with the British, carefully navigating their frontier anxieties. By portraying himself as a stabilizing force in a turbulent region, Gulab Singh garnered British support—or at least tolerance—for his frontier endeavors. This diplomatic posture was evident in his careful compliance with the Treaty of Amritsar (1846), which formalized his sovereignty under British suzerainty while granting him freedom to administer his territories, including the frontiers, as he saw fit.²³ He reassured the British that his military activities were not aimed at upsetting imperial interests but were instead designed to ensure internal stability and secure northern routes from potential Russian influence.

In essence, Gulab Singh's military and diplomatic measures on the frontier were intertwined instruments of statecraft. His campaigns not only expanded his territorial reach but also communicated political authority to local

¹⁸ Moorcroft, W., & Trebeck, G. (1841). *Travels in the Himalayan provinces* (Vol. II, pp. 218–225). John Murray.

¹⁹ Bakshi, S. R. (1997). *Zorawar Singh: The Conqueror of Ladakh* (pp. 32–35). Anmol Publications.

²⁰ Lamb, A. (1991). *Kashmir: A disputed legacy, 1846–1990* (pp. 41–43). Roxford Books.

²¹ Zutshi, C. (2014). *Kashmir's contested past* (pp. 68–70). Oxford University Press.

²² Drew, F. (1875). *The Jummoo and Kashmir territories: A geographical account* (pp. 210–215). Edward Stanford.

²³ Government of India. (1846). *Treaty of Amritsar, March 16, 1846*. Calcutta: Foreign Department Records.



opulations. Simultaneously, his diplomatic engagements fostered a stable, if fragile, order that preserved autonomy while aligning with the regional strategic interests of the British Empire.

Relations with Frontier Tribes and Principalities

A key dimension of Maharaja Gulab Singh's north-western frontier policy was his management of relations with the myriad tribes and principalities that inhabited this strategically sensitive region. The frontier was home to diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Shina-speaking Dards in Gilgit, Balti Muslims in Baltistan, Ladakhi Buddhists, and nomadic tribes scattered across the highlands. These groups had long maintained relative autonomy, often governed by local rulers, tribal elders, or religious authorities. Gulab Singh's policy thus had to accommodate deeply rooted traditions of self-governance while asserting the authority of the Dogra state.

One of his primary strategies was the co-optation of local rulers. Rather than eliminating indigenous political structures outright, Gulab Singh allowed many tribal chiefs and petty rulers to retain a measure of authority, provided they acknowledged Dogra suzerainty and paid tribute. This was particularly evident in the treatment of the rajas of Baltistan and the mir of Hunza, whose cooperation was intermittently secured through diplomatic negotiation, matrimonial alliances, and at times military coercion.²⁴ By recognizing and rewarding loyalty, the Maharaja minimized resistance and created a system of indirect rule that was both practical and sustainable given the limited resources of the state.

However, when local rulers or tribal leaders posed a threat to Dogra authority or refused to comply, military intervention was swift. The campaign in Baltistan in 1840, for instance, led to the capture of the Raja of Skardu and the annexation of the region after a Dogra victory under Zorawar Singh.²⁵ Similar efforts were made in Gilgit, where Gulab Singh installed Dogra governors but also maintained alliances with local notables. The balance between force and accommodation was central to his strategy, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the region's socio-political fabric.

The religious diversity of the frontier further complicated governance. The Dogra state, being Hindu-ruled, had to govern regions with significant Muslim and Buddhist populations. In areas like Ladakh, Gulab Singh allowed the continuation of Buddhist institutions and supported the maintenance of monasteries, which helped in pacifying the population.²⁶ In Muslim-majority regions like Gilgit and Baltistan, the Maharaja employed Muslim officials and avoided overt religious interference, thereby preserving a semblance of communal balance. His rule, while autocratic in structure, exhibited a degree of religious pragmatism that helped prevent large-scale uprisings and ensured administrative continuity.

Moreover, the Dogra court-maintained surveillance and intelligence networks across the frontier. Reports from frontier agents, revenue collectors, and military scouts allowed the state to respond swiftly to threats and monitor the loyalties of tribal groups. Frontier diplomacy also involved the use of symbolic gestures—gifts, titles, and robes of honor—that were crucial in securing the allegiance of tribal elites and fostering a sense of mutual dependence between the center and the periphery.²⁷

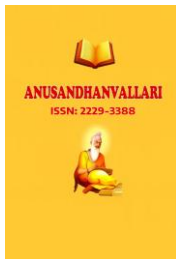
In conclusion, Gulab Singh's dealings with frontier tribes and principalities combined diplomacy, coercion, and cultural accommodation. By integrating local elites into the Dogra administrative framework and respecting

²⁴ Dani, A. H. (2001). History of Northern Areas of Pakistan (pp. 88–91). Sang-e-Meel Publications.

²⁵ Bakshi, S. R. (1997). Zorawar Singh: The Conqueror of Ladakh (pp. 57–60). Anmol Publications.

²⁶ Petech, L. (1977). The Kingdom of Ladakh, c. 950–1842 A.D. (pp. 130–133). Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

²⁷ Drew, F. (1875). The Jummoo and Kashmir territories: A geographical account (pp. 234–238). Edward Stanford.



regional sensibilities where feasible, he established a relatively stable governance model in an otherwise volatile and fragmented frontier.

British Influence and Gulab Singh's Frontier Diplomacy

The mid-nineteenth century saw the consolidation of British authority in the Indian subcontinent, and the expansion of British geopolitical interests into Central Asia. In this context, Maharaja Gulab Singh's frontier policy was shaped not only by local imperatives but also by his need to navigate the growing influence of the British Empire. His diplomatic strategy was defined by pragmatism—he recognized that survival and sovereignty depended on aligning his interests with those of the British without ceding internal autonomy.

The Treaty of Amritsar (1846) was the starting point for this unique relationship. By paying seventy-five lakhs of rupees to the British, Gulab Singh secured legal recognition as an independent Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.²⁸ This treaty transformed him from a vassal of the Lahore Darbar into a princely ruler under British suzerainty. In return, he was expected to govern effectively, maintain order on the frontier, and support British strategic objectives in the region.

Gulab Singh was acutely aware of British anxieties regarding Russian expansion into Central Asia—the central concern of the so-called "Great Game." His frontier policy was designed to allay these fears by demonstrating his ability to serve as a buffer against Russian influence. The Dogra campaigns in Gilgit, Baltistan, and Ladakh, although aimed at consolidating his territory, also had the unintended effect of securing British India's northern flank from potential Russian or Central Asian incursions.²⁹ British officials, although cautious about Gulab Singh's independent streak, largely tolerated his northern campaigns, viewing them as beneficial to imperial interests.

However, British suspicion was never entirely absent. Gulab Singh's fortification of strategic passes and control over trans-Himalayan trade routes occasionally raised concerns in Calcutta. The British often sought intelligence about Dogra movements in frontier zones, and correspondence between British Residents and the Punjab Government frequently mentioned Gulab Singh's activities in Gilgit and his interactions with frontier tribes.³⁰ Yet, despite these concerns, the Maharaja managed to maintain cordial relations with British authorities, presenting himself as a loyal, if ambitious, princely ally.

To this end, Gulab Singh adopted a measured diplomatic approach. He regularly communicated with British representatives, sought advice on legal and administrative matters, and avoided any moves that could be interpreted as anti-British. His government often deferred to British opinion on sensitive external matters, especially in relation to Tibet and the northern borderlands. This diplomatic caution allowed him to pursue a bold frontier policy internally while appearing cooperative externally.³¹

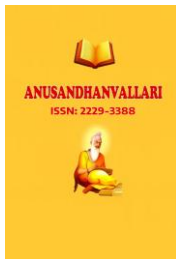
British influence also came in the form of indirect pressure to modernize and stabilize governance in frontier areas. The British expected that princely states like Jammu and Kashmir would act as responsible stewards of their territories, particularly in volatile zones. In this respect, Gulab Singh's efforts to build roads, improve

²⁸ Government of India. (1846). Treaty of Amritsar, March 16, 1846. Calcutta: Foreign Department Records.

²⁹ Ingram, E. (1979). In defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775–1842 (pp. 201–203). Routledge.

³⁰ Karakorum, H. (1993). British Policy and the Northern Frontier of India (pp. 117–120). New Delhi: Criterion Press.

³¹ Zutshi, C. (2014). Kashmir's contested past (pp. 75–77). Oxford University Press.



ommunication, and establish rudimentary administrative systems in frontier regions reflected both personal initiative and subtle imperial encouragement.³²

In conclusion, Gulab Singh's frontier diplomacy was defined by his ability to walk the tightrope between assertion and accommodation. While he expanded and secured his northern borders with military vigor, he carefully nurtured a diplomatic relationship with the British that shielded him from interference and enabled a high degree of autonomy in regional affairs. His strategy of aligning with imperial interests while safeguarding princely sovereignty was central to the durability of his rule in one of the most sensitive geopolitical zones of nineteenth-century Asia.

Impact and Legacy of the Policy

Maharaja Gulab Singh's north-western frontier policy had far-reaching consequences, both immediate and long-term, for the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and the broader geopolitical dynamics of South and Central Asia. His approach to securing and governing the frontier was not only a response to the volatile realities of the time but also a visionary attempt to create a defensible, cohesive, and strategically significant state.

One of the most enduring impacts of his policy was the geopolitical consolidation of Jammu and Kashmir. By integrating the remote and diverse territories of Ladakh, Gilgit, and Baltistan into his dominion, Gulab Singh laid the geographical foundations for what became the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under British paramountcy. These acquisitions gave the state a unique topographical diversity, extending from the plains of Jammu to the high mountain passes bordering Central Asia.³³ While this territorial expansion presented administrative challenges, it also enhanced the strategic stature of the state, making it a key player in the imperial frontier system.

Gulab Singh's efforts also brought about a degree of political stability in previously fragmented regions. His method of indirect rule, accommodation of local elites, and establishment of Dogra authority helped pacify areas long troubled by inter-tribal conflicts and shifting allegiances. Though resistance and rebellion were not entirely absent, the overall result was a significant reduction in lawlessness and the integration of disparate regions under a centralized, though flexible, administration.³⁴ This stability proved crucial for maintaining peace in an otherwise volatile frontier during a period of intense imperial rivalry.

Another legacy of the policy was its symbolic and cultural impact. The Dogra presence introduced new administrative structures, tax systems, and judicial mechanisms, altering the traditional power dynamics in frontier societies. Temples, forts, and administrative buildings constructed during this period symbolized state authority and reflected the Maharaja's ambition to civilize and systematize governance in the borderlands. However, this process also generated resentment among some local populations, particularly where it disrupted traditional privileges or imposed unfamiliar rules.³⁵ Despite these tensions, the Dogra frontier administration became a model for later princely and British governance in other parts of the frontier.

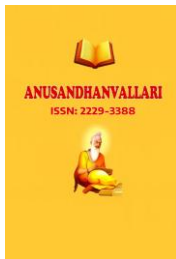
In the broader imperial context, Gulab Singh's frontier policy complemented British strategic objectives. By acting as a buffer ruler, he indirectly contributed to the British policy of containing Russian expansionism. The stability he achieved in the northern frontier allowed the British to minimize their own military presence in the region and focus resources elsewhere. Over time, British interest in regions like Gilgit increased, leading to the establishment

³² Drew, F. (1875). *The Jummoo and Kashmir territories: A geographical account* (pp. 245–250). Edward Stanford.

³³ Moorcroft, W., & Trebeck, G. (1841). *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab* (Vol. 2, pp. 308–310). John Murray.

³⁴ Drew, F. (1875). *The Jummoo and Kashmir territories: A geographical account* (pp. 270–273). Edward Stanford.

³⁵ Zutshi, C. (2014). *Kashmir's contested past* (pp. 82–85). Oxford University Press.



of the Gilgit Agency in 1889, but this development built upon the foundations laid by Gulab Singh decades earlier.³⁶

Finally, the legacy of Gulab Singh's frontier policy continues to resonate in contemporary geopolitics. The territories he annexed and integrated became the focus of later disputes between India, Pakistan, and China. Gilgit-Baltistan, Ladakh, and surrounding regions have remained contested spaces, and their historical linkage to Gulab Singh's state-building efforts is often invoked in territorial claims and national narratives.³⁷ Thus, his policies, though designed for a specific historical moment, have left a lasting imprint on the political geography of South Asia.

In summary, Maharaja Gulab Singh's north-western frontier policy had transformative effects on regional governance, imperial strategy, and territorial configuration. His combination of military assertiveness, diplomatic tact, and administrative innovation established a legacy that outlived his reign and shaped the political landscape of the subcontinent for generations.

Conclusion

The north-western frontier policy of Maharaja Gulab Singh represents one of the most formidable and tactically sophisticated efforts at territorial consolidation and state-building in 19th-century South Asia. Faced with immense geographical challenges, a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups, and the growing shadow of British imperialism, Gulab Singh navigated a turbulent frontier with a combination of military strength, political pragmatism, and diplomatic restraint.

His policy succeeded in extending Dogra authority into regions such as Ladakh, Baltistan, and Gilgit, thereby securing a northern buffer zone that was critical for the defense and expansion of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Through his commander Zorawar Singh, he was able to bring vast tracts of high-altitude terrain under nominal control, projecting Dogra power into the Himalayas and beyond. These gains were not only territorial but also symbolic, showcasing the capabilities of an indigenous Indian ruler in a period dominated by colonial expansion.

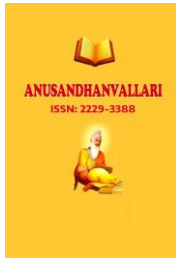
Gulab Singh's approach to governance in these frontier regions was marked by a high degree of flexibility. He employed a blend of direct and indirect rule, allowing traditional power structures to persist while inserting his own authority through military outposts and loyal administrators. His tolerance toward local religious and cultural practices helped reduce resistance and fostered a fragile but functional relationship between the state and its peripheral regions.

Yet, the limitations of this policy were equally significant. Administrative reach was uneven, and dependence on military coercion often alienated local populations. The difficult terrain and limited infrastructure meant that communication and control were perpetually tenuous. Moreover, as British interest in the north-west frontier grew—driven by the anxieties of the Great Game—Gulab Singh's ability to act independently diminished. The eventual British intervention in Gilgit and their establishment of the Gilgit Agency highlighted the limits of the Dogra state's sovereignty in frontier matters.

Despite these constraints, the legacy of Gulab Singh's frontier policy endures. It shaped the political geography of northern India and laid the foundation for the future princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—a state whose frontiers remain geopolitically sensitive to this day. His reign exemplifies the agency of Indian rulers during the colonial era and challenges narratives that portray indigenous powers as mere victims of imperialism.

³⁶ Ingram, E. (1979). In defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775–1842 (pp. 215–218). Routledge.

³⁷ Snedden, C. (2012). The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir (pp. 35–39). Hurst & Company.



In the final analysis, Maharaja Gulab Singh's north-western frontier policy was not only a response to immediate strategic imperatives but also a forward-looking vision of statecraft in a highly contested and fluid political environment. His achievements, tempered by the limitations of the time, stand as a testament to the complexities of governance at the edge of empire.

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