

Colonel Robert Thorp and Kashmir

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On 22 November 1868 Colonel Robert Thorp was found dead in mysterious circumstances at the base of Kohi-Suleiman hill in Srinagar. He had been murdered. However, he was not the only Britisher who was assassinated in Kashmir State during 1860s. Another Britisher called George Hayward, a military intelligence agent, was killed on 18 July 1870 by the men of Mir Wali, chief of Yasin principality. Hayward had, during a previous trip to the Gilgit region, exposed the war crimes of Maharaja Ranbir Singh's Dogra troops which they had committed in Yasin in 1860 and 1863. Hayward sent details of Dogra atrocities to Calcutta newspaper "*The Pioneer*" which it published under his name: Dogra troops had indulged in wholesale massacre of Yasinis including "tossing babies into the air and cutting them in half as they fell" (p.340 *The Great Game* Peter Hoopkirk). Hayward had done Yasinis a service by exposing Dogra bloodletting against them. Yet the Yasin Chief got him killed. The finger of suspicion was raised against Maharaja Ranbir Singh of Kashmir and Mehtar Amanul-Mulk of Chitral. Hayward lies buried in Gilgit Christian cemetery.

Likewise, when in November 1868 Colonel Thorp was poisoned to death the finger of suspicion was raised against Maharaja Ranbir Singh (who had more than one reason to be annoyed with Colonel Thorp). The British Government of India desisted from taking any action against Maharaja Ranbir Singh because he had served them in good stead during 1857 mutiny. Not only did he furnish troops and money to their war effort he also went personally to fight against Indian freedom fighters whom he later described in a letter to the British Government of India as "faithless bastards"(p.47 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh* S. S. Charak).

Colonel Thorp initially came to Kashmir as a tourist and hunter of big game. However, his attention was soon directed towards the sorrows of Kashmiri Muslims who were labouring under the worst kind of misrule that they had ever witnessed. Since his own mother had been a Kashmiri Muslim lady, he felt a brotherly feeling for Kashmiris. His father had married Jana of Tosa Maidan side some thirty years ago. So he made it his business to study and expose the pattern of misrule unleashed against them by Maharaja Ranbir Singh and his agents. Those days Englishmen were allowed to stay in Kashmir Valley only for summer months, i.e., from April to November. So Colonel Thorp was constrained to visit Kashmir during summers to complete his researches on Kashmir misgovernment. Simultaneous to his researches he brought the miserable condition of Kashmiri Muslims into the notice of Governments of India and England by publishing his findings.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a bigoted Hindu who had absolutely no sympathy for Kashmiri Muslims who constituted the majority of his subjects. For his own co-religionists he opened Sanskrit schools and raised temples in and around Jammu city, the most prominent among them being the Rangunath temple complex with its Sanskrit school. Moreover, he spent huge amounts of money on the maintenance of foreign Hindu religious establishments such as at Haridwar, Kashi, Prayag, Badrinth, etc.(p.278-9 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh* S. S. Charak). Also he constructed, for the benefit of the miniscule Kashmir Pandit minority, temple complexes throughout the length and breadth of Kashmir Valley such as Martand, Bijbehara, Pampore, Khir Bhawani, Gadadar, Sharda, etc.(p.280 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh* S. S. Charak).

The huge expenses thus incurred were extracted from poverty stricken Kashmiri Muslims in the shape of temple tax, Sanskrit tax and all sort of other taxes. Even prostitutes and grave diggers were taxed heavily(pp 130-31 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh S. S. Charak*). If a starved coolie carried the luggage of a traveller in Kashmir Valley, he had to surrender half his earning to Maharaja's coffers. Likewise houses, marriages, cattle, beasts of burden, grazing, etc. were taxed to the maximum (p 133 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh S. S. Charak*). Kashmir State under Ranbir Singh was a kind of *bania*, shopkeeper, who reserved a monopoly on the sale of grain. The State collected grain from tillers and stashed it away in storehouses and then sold it to city folk. Even if people had money they could not buy grain beyond a certain limit with the result they were forced to go hungry for considerable part of the year. The State allowed the grain to rot on the threshing floors and in storehouses rather than allow the people to eat it. Also the State did not allow trade between city and village folk. Likewise, the State enjoyed monopoly on silk, saffron, the aromatic root called koth, opium poppy, narcotic drug marijuana (bhang/charas), paper, tobacco, salt, minerals, fruit trees, timber(pp 131 and 298 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh S. S. Charak*). The State taxed shawl industry to the extent of 85% and land produce to the extent of 75%. At harvest time Maharaja's agent called Shakdar closely watched the crops lest the tiller might steal part of the produce. This Shakdar falsely accused him of stealing part of the crop. The poor fellow thought it better to bribe the agent rather than get involved in a case of theft.

Also Kashmiri Muslim was taken on forced labour to Gilgit and Astor to carry ammunition and grain for Dogra troops. He was not allowed to touch the grain that he had grown and was now carrying on his back on treacherous mountain passes even if he died of starvation en route(pp73-76 *Cashmere Misgovernment Kashmir Papers Robert Thorp*).

During famines which recurred in Kashmir Valley at regular intervals Kashmiri Muslims, yes only Muslims, perished like flies because of the wrongs of Ranbir Singh's Government. At such times his agents would search Kashmiri Muslim households to check if they be hiding grain. They kept a strict vigil on starving Muslims lest they might indulge in cow slaughter which was punishable by death; or they might resort to fishing, fishing being banned since the death in August 1857 of Maharaja Gulab Singh, the reason for banning fishing being that the late Maharaja's spirit had taken its abode in the body of a fish in Kashmir, so said the Brahmins at that time. During 1865 famine three Kashmiri Muslims were sighted by an English traveller on the bank of River Jhelum where they had been kept for three days and nights wearing stinking fish around their necks in the shape of garlands. Their crime was that they had violated the ban on fishing(p30 *Wrongs of Cashmere Kashmir Papers Arthur Brinkman*). The net result was that population of Kashmir Valley progressively dwindled throughout Ranbir Singh's rule, 1856 – 1885, while at the same time his coffers swelled.

Whereas the Maharaja encouraged and funded Sanskrit learning among Hindus he did nothing for the education of Kashmiri Muslims who filled his coffers by paying him taxes. On the contrary when Ahli-Hadis preachers started educating Muslims in Shopian, Ranbir Singh persecuted them ruthlessly and hounded them out(p. 285 *The Valley of Kashmir Walter Lawrence*). If Ahli-Hadis had been allowed to preach it would mean that the Muslims would get some education.

It was this tyrannical rule that became the focus of Colonel Thorp's attention. He studied how Ranbir Singh's agents fleeced Kashmiri Muslims and who these agents were. They included: the Dum (a sort of policeman); Harkara (informant); Taroungdar (revenue official responsible for weighing of State share of land produce); Shakdar (watchman of crops); Sargowl (head of 10 Shakdars); Kardar (collector of land revenue); Patwari (record keeper of houses and land cultivated); Mukadam (village headman and assistant to Patwari); Thanedar (police officer and magistrate with power to inflict corporal punishment); and above all the Tehsildar, officer of a district, (pp50-52 *Cashmere*

Misgovernment Kashmir Papers Robert Thorp). The Tehsildar reported direct to the Governor. Those days the Governor of Kashmir was the dreaded Kripa Ram, the author of *Gulabnama*, and *Gulzari-Kashmir*. He was likewise a bigoted Hindu and is credited with the authorship of an anti-Islam book titled “*Raddi-Islam – The Rejection of Islam*”. It was with his support and assistance that Pandit Raja Kakh Dhar, Daroga Dagshali, Chief of Shawl Department, drowned 28 shawl workers at Zaldagar Srinagar on 29 April 1865 for demanding permission to buy more rice to eat. They were expected to work and pay huge taxes but at the same time they were not allowed to buy sufficient rice to feed their families. Robert Thorp published the details of how shawl industry worked; and of the extortionate taxes levied on it; and also of shawl workers’ massacre to the outside world(pp 62-66 *Cashmere Misgovernment Kashmir Papers Robert Thorp*).

Robert Thorp not only exposed the tyrannical rule of Maharaja he also exposed and protested against his imperial adventures. It so happened that in 1861 the Muslims of Eastern Turkistan(called Sinkiang since 1884) rose up in rebellion against Chinese authorities. When the Muslim insurrection spread throughout the province an adventurer called Buzurg Khan returned from exile in the Western Turkistan Khanate of Khokand. He was accompanied by his protégé Yaqub Beg. It was January 1865(p 322 *The Great Game Peter Hopkirk*). Within two years time Yaqub Beg managed to wrest Kashgar and Yarkand from the Chinese as well as from local rebels. He installed his patron Buzurg Khan as the King of what now came to be called as Kashgaria. Taking advantage of the unrest and political uncertainty in Eastern Turkistan, Maharaja Ranbir Singh dispatched in 1864 a small force across Karokoram Pass sixty miles deep inside to Shahidullah(now called Xaidulla) located on Leh-Kashgar caravan route(p 22 *Kashmir A Disputed Legacy A. Lamb*; p203 *Maharaja Ranbir Singh S. S. Charak*).There they set up a fort on the left bank of river Karakash. A British surveyor of the time called W.H. Johnson, who had a nexus with Ranbir Singh, showed the northeastern frontier of Kashmir State on official British Indian maps some hundred miles away into the trans-Karakoram region to cover Shahidullah garrison. This measure on his part extended Kashmir State by some 21000 square miles of territory including Shaksgam Valley and Aksai Chin wasteland(p 23 *Kashmir A Disputed Legacy A. Lamb*). Colonel Thorp protested through his write-ups that occupation of Shahidullah was a violation of Treaty of Amritsar because the boundary of Kashmir State, according to British perceptions, lied along the Karakoram watershed. In 1867 Ranbir Singh recalled Shahidullah garrison. Later that year Yaqub Beg’s troops pillaged and destroyed the Shahidullah fort(p89 *Cashmere Misgovernment Kashmir Papers Robert Thorp*).

Ranbir Singh’s occupation of Shahidullah for some years and subsequent Johnson mapping set up a sort of fake claim for Maharaja Ranbir Singh on territory which belonged to Eastern Turkistan. Post-1947, the Shahidullah occupation and Johnson map became the root cause of bloody dispute between India on one side and Pakistan and China on the other side over Shaksgam and Aksai China.

For the service that Johnson thus rendered, Maharaja Ranbir Singh rewarded him in 1872 by appointing him Waziri-Wazarat, Governor, of Ladakh; but Robert Thorp, who challenged openly Ranbir Singh’s claim on trans-Karakoram region; and proposed to the British Government of India outright annexation of Kashmir as a punishment, had to suffer assassination. He was murdered, allegedly by Maharaja Ranbir Singh’s agents, in 1868. He lies buried in the Christian cemetery of Sheikhabagh Srinagar.