British Centralisation, Geopolitics, and the Subversion of Local Authority in the Gilgit Agency (1935–1947)

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Abstract

This research paper presents a historical appraisal of the British lease years in the Gilgit Agency, arguing that the period between 1935 and 1947 was not merely a strategic military interlude but a concerted and deliberate campaign of political centralisation that fundamentally undermined the existing indigenous and diarchal power structures. The primary catalyst for the lease, secured from the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, was rooted in the escalating geopolitical anxieties surrounding the expansion of Soviet communism in Central Asia, a continuation of the 'Great Game' played out on the 'Roof of the World.' However, this strategic rationale served as the immediate pretext for a deeper imperial objective: the systemic singularisation of authority. Through administrative fiat, incentives, and the subordination of local chieftains (Mirs and Rajas), the British Political Agent became the sole sovereign. This process curtailed the independent foreign relations of principalities like Hunza and Nagar, alienated the Gilgit region from the Dogra administration, and established a uniform, centralised rule. The subsequent abrupt termination of the lease and the hasty handover of this strategically realigned territory back to the Dogra regime in 1947 directly precipitated the local rebellion, a violent reaction against the failure of the centralising British project and the unwanted return to a despised external authority. The Gilgit Rebellion, therefore, was the inevitable political culmination of a decade of systematic administrative and psychological alienation engineered by the paramount power.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Gilgit Agency, Centralisation, Lease, Dogra, Sovereignty

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The Gilgit Agency, perched at the confluence of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayan mountain ranges, has historically occupied a position of profound strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance. During the zenith of the British Raj, this remote region served as the ultimate northern frontier, a critical vulnerability in the imperial defense calculus against rival powers. The complex, often volatile, history of Gilgit, characterised by periods of autonomy, Dogra conquest, and ultimately, British oversight, reached a defining inflection point with the sixty-year lease agreement signed in 1935 (Bangash 2010). This essay posits that the British lease of the Gilgit Agency was primarily motivated by the immediate need for a robust strategic buffer against communist expansionism and, crucially, that this period was systematically exploited to consolidate central authority, thereby eroding the pluralistic, semi-autonomous sovereignty previously exercised by local Mirs and Rajas and concurrently alienating the territory from the Jammu and Kashmir State (Qayyum 2013). This consolidation was an administrative necessity, deemed paramount for effective frontier control, yet it fundamentally reshaped the region's political destiny.

Prior to the 1935 lease, the governance of the Gilgit Agency was a cumbersome political hybrid, a system often described as diarchal, involving the Dogra Governor's civil jurisdiction and the British Political Agent's (PA) control over external security matters, particularly concerning the independent princely states and tribal territories (Ali 2019). This convoluted administrative arrangement was deemed insufficient to withstand the rapidly evolving geopolitical threats emanating from the Soviet Union, especially following the Bolshevik Revolution. The anxiety over communist expansion into Sinkiang and the subsequent spillover into the North-West Frontier required a unified, decisive imperial hand, unencumbered by the internal complications of the Maharaja's administration. Therefore, the lease agreement, while respecting the theoretical suzerainty of the Dogra ruler, was designed as a mechanism to surgically extract political control and operational management from the less-trusted Kashmir Darbar, replacing divided rule with an singular, efficient imperial command structure.

The central argument articulated here extends beyond mere strategic concerns, asserting that the British administration, under the PA, actively pursued a policy of singularisation of authority during the lease years. This involved bringing all peripheral territories, including the previously independent princely states of Hunza and Nagar, and the tribal republics like Chilas, directly under the control of the Political Agent's office. This effort was executed through deliberate administrative, economic, and military means, including the granting of subsidies to curtail autonomous foreign relations and the creation of paramilitary forces loyal only to the British Crown. The cumulative effect of these actions was the deliberate erasure of the region's historical political ambiguity, establishing a robust, centralised authority that ultimately backfired. The sudden, politically motivated termination of the lease in 1947 and the immediate reversion to Dogra rule effectively reversed this decade-long process of centralisation, sparking the localized "Gilgit Rebellion" as a predictable, violent response to political abandonment and the imposition of a foreign, detested authority (Brown 2014).

The historiography of the Gilgit Agency, particularly concerning the lease years, remains a complex and often contested field,

bifurcated primarily between colonial and post-colonial narratives. The initial wave of literature, heavily dominated by accounts from British officials and authors who served in the region, tends to validate the official rationale for the lease: the necessity of countering Russian or Soviet expansionism in Central Asia, a function described as critical to the defense of the Indian Empire (Sökefeld 2018). These colonial texts often portray the British intervention as beneficial, highlighting the administrative deficiencies of the Dogra regime and suggesting that the subsequent British rule offered the local populace a "sigh of relief," thereby justifying the imposition of direct control over the existing dual system (Brown 2001). Such narratives, however, must be critically evaluated through the lens of post-colonial theory, as they inherently seek to legitimize and glorify the colonial project by emphasizing the "barbarian" nature of the colonized and the "enlightening" mission of the colonizer (Said 1994).

Conversely, a significant body of contemporary and indigenous scholarship challenges the benign veneer of the British lease, focusing instead on the underlying imperial motives of manipulation, control, and resource extraction. Scholars contend that the establishment of the Gilgit Agency, and the subsequent lease, was a calculated move to secure key trade routes and ensure the political subordination of the local rulers, such as the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar, who maintained inconvenient ties with China (Qayyum 2013). This literature applies critical theoretical frameworks, such as those of Foucault and Said, to deconstruct the "colonial discourse" employed by British officials, viewing their writings not as impartial historical accounts but as a form of "archeology of knowledge" designed to institutionalize a master-slave power dynamic and distort the history of the colonized world (Foucault 1972). Ultimately, while both strands acknowledge the overwhelming strategic importance of the region, the core divergence lies in interpreting the *intent* of the lease—whether it was a protective measure for the subcontinent or a calculated move to seize sole, unchecked authority over a vital frontier.

This research paper adopts a qualitative, analytical-descriptive research methodology, relying heavily on a critical analysis of primary and secondary source materials pertaining to the Gilgit Agency during the period 1935–1947. The primary data is drawn from official British colonial records, which detail administrative decisions, political correspondences between the Political Agent and the Residency in Kashmir, and internal military reports justifying the consolidation of power. These governmental documents are triangulated with primary accounts from key actors, such as the memoirs of British officers involved in the handover and the political narratives of indigenous leaders involved in the rebellion, ensuring a breadth of perspective (Khan n.d.). This approach is vital, as the discourse produced by colonial administrations requires meticulous deconstruction to discern vested interests and underlying political agendas (Goddard and Melville 2004).

The analysis of secondary literature is structured to facilitate a comparative critique, utilizing both established colonial accounts and contemporary subaltern studies. The theories of political philosophers, particularly the concepts of jurisdictional fluidity proposed by Lauren Benton and the colonial discourse critique of Edward Said, are applied as analytical frameworks to interpret the actions of the British administration.

Specifically, the study employs descriptive analysis to categorize the patterns of administrative changes and compare the rhetoric of British justification (the communist threat) against the observable outcomes (centralisation and alienation) in Gilgit. This critical engagement with varied sources—from diplomatic agreements to personal narratives—is essential for moving beyond a simple historical chronology and offering a nuanced appraisal of the British policy of singularisation of authority within the lease years.

The Strategic Calculus: Geopolitics and the Great Game's Enduring Shadow

The decision by the British to secure a sixty-year lease over the Gilgit Agency in 1935 was the final, formal act in a prolonged geopolitical drama rooted in the nineteenth-century 'Great Game'—the struggle for influence between the British and Russian Empires across Central Asia. This region, commonly referred to as the "Roof of the World," was deemed the strategic apex of India's northern defence, a geographic chokepoint where the movements of hostile powers could be most effectively monitored and contained (Jalali 2009). The emergence of the Soviet Union after 1917, coupled with its expansionist ideology and the subsequent consolidation of Soviet power in neighbouring Central Asian Republics (Tajikistan and Kirgizia), presented the British Raj with a threat far more ideologically potent and immediate than the Tsarist expansionism of old.

The existing administrative arrangement, characterized by a diarchal tension between the British Political Agent (PA) and the Dogra Governor (Wazir), was deemed dangerously inefficient in the face of this modern, ideological threat. The complex division of labour, where the PA handled external security and the Dogra regime managed internal civil administration, resulted in jurisdictional ambiguity and slow decision-making, an unacceptable vulnerability given the perceived immediacy of a Soviet push through Sinkiang (Ali 2019). British officials fundamentally lacked faith in the Dogra Maharaja's capacity, resources, or dedication to maintain a robust, modern defence posture along this volatile frontier. They required direct, unencumbered operational control over military logistics and intelligence-gathering, functions that the Dogra administration, despite its nominal suzerainty, was incapable of delivering at the required speed.

The 1935 lease, therefore, was a prophylactic military measure disguised in diplomatic garb. It allowed the British to bypass the cumbersome layers of the Jammu and Kashmir Darbar, which they regarded as corrupt and institutionally weak, and install a direct chain of command leading straight back to the Government of India through the Residency in Kashmir. The lease agreement itself, while legally acknowledging that the territory remained part of the J&K State, was fundamentally a transfer of *de facto* sovereignty over all civil and military governance to the British for the duration of the term (Zain 2010). This administrative extraction was essential for implementing the 'Forward Policy'—a doctrine requiring the imperial power to control the region of immediate threat, rather than defending the main frontiers from behind.

The anxiety was magnified by the persistent, albeit nominal, tributary ties maintained by the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar with the Chinese *Amban* in Kashgar. While these ties were largely symbolic, they

represented an unacceptable diplomatic ambiguity on the frontier, particularly at a time when the British were desperate to solidify a clear, internationally recognised boundary against Chinese and Soviet influence (Etherton 1911). The lease provided the necessary legal and political leverage to compel the local rulers to renounce these ties, making the Political Agent the undisputed authority on all matters of foreign and interstate relations. This strategic move effectively 'closed' the last fluid frontier in the region, bringing the geopolitically critical principalities entirely within the British sphere of influence.

The British strategic calculation was therefore two-fold: immediate military security and long-term administrative centralisation. The military objective was to create an efficient buffer state capable of mobilising forces and intelligence rapidly (Brown 2014). The administrative objective, conversely, was to consolidate a fragmented political landscape—a landscape consisting of directly administered British territory, Dogra-controlled *wazarats*, and semi-autonomous principalities—into a singular unit controlled by one authority (Sökefeld 2018). This singularisation process was viewed as a prerequisite for effective frontier management, ensuring that resources, intelligence, and military units, such as the Gilgit Scouts, operated under a unified, decisive command structure, a necessity that trumped all considerations of local tradition or the Maharaja's territorial claims.

The initial British engagement with Gilgit, marked by the establishment of the Gilgit Agency in 1889 under Colonel Algernon Durand, already signalled this strategic imperative. The Agency's formation, subsequent to the earlier presence of an officer on "special duty," was a clear attempt to institutionalise a check on the Dogra power that the British themselves had enabled through the Treaty of Amritsar (Biddulph 1880). The Dogra conquest of Gilgit, though brutal, was ultimately facilitated by British support in return for services rendered during the 1857 Mutiny, yet this reliance bred distrust among the British regarding the Dogra's capability to maintain order and defence. This historical dynamic reveals that the 1935 lease was not an isolated event but the ultimate conclusion of a fifty-year strategy to exert direct control over the region without the politically problematic step of formal annexation of J&K territory. The need for a strong central rule, therefore, was a function of both external threat (Soviet Communism) and internal doubt (Dogra incompetence).

The Mechanics of Singularization: Undermining Plural Sovereignty

The political reality of Gilgit prior to 1935 was one of fragmented, overlapping jurisdictions, with the core Gilgit district operating under a diarchy where the Dogra Governor managed civil affairs and the British Political Agent managed external security and relations with the peripheral states (Chohan 1997). This pluralistic system, which granted significant autonomy to the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar, and the chieftains of Yasin and Ghizer, stood in direct opposition to the British imperial need for a monolithic, command-and-control frontier. The lease agreement provided the legal basis for the Political Agent to discard this unwieldy system and aggressively pursue a project of singularisation, transforming himself from a diplomatic overseer into the region's sole sovereign. This transition was marked by calculated administrative and economic manoeuvres designed to dismantle local independence.

A key target of this singularisation was the historically significant political and economic autonomy of the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar. These rulers had long maintained a delicate balance between acknowledging the suzerainty of the Kashmir Darbar (by paying tribute) and the Chinese Amban in Kashgar (by collecting grazing taxes and paying a yearly sum of gold dust) (Leitner 1996). After 1935, the Political Agent used the leverage of the lease to compel the Mir of Hunza to formally cease paying the annual tribute to the Chinese. In exchange for forfeiting his rights to grazing charges in the Tagdambash Pamir and cultivation property in Raskam, the Mir was granted a significant increase in his annual stipend and a valuable *jageer* in Bagrot Nallah (Qayyum 2013). This act was more than a financial transaction; it was a definitive termination of Hunza's autonomous foreign policy and an effective declaration that the PA was now the sole arbiter of sovereignty in the region.

The enhanced subsidies and land grants were strategically applied across the principalities to turn local rulers into salaried subordinates of the British Crown, effectively exchanging their nominal sovereignty for guaranteed, non-volatile income. This co-option strategy systematically reduced the Mirs and Rajas to mere local administrators, accountable to the Political Agent for all major political decisions, thereby limiting their power to internal affairs only, and even then, under British oversight. The goal was to establish a clear hierarchy where the PA stood as the ultimate sovereign authority, crushing any vestiges of the previous pluralistic power structure where the Dogra, the Mirs, and the PA jostled for influence. The Mirs, once autonomous actors on the chessboard of Central Asian power, became financially dependent cogs in the British administrative machine.

Furthermore, the British aggressively extended central control over the independent tribal communities, such as Darel and Tangir, and the governorships of Yasin, Ghizer, and Ishkomann, which had previously acknowledged only loose tributary ties to the Kashmir Darbar. These areas were brought under the direct supervision of an Assistant Political Agent (APA), whose function was to ensure complete administrative uniformity and adherence to the British-imposed central policy. This direct rule, often bypassing traditional systems of governance, solidified the Political Agent's domination over the periphery and completed the geographical map of British-controlled Gilgit (Kreutzmann 2015). The aim was the total elimination of 'liminal spaces'—zones of ambiguous governance—that could be exploited by rival powers or provide a base for local insurgency.

The formation and continued reliance on the Gilgit Scouts (GS) was the military manifestation of this centralisation. Reorganized under British officers, the Gilgit Scouts, composed of local recruits, served as the Political Agent's private, loyal force, distinct from and often antagonistic towards the Jammu and Kashmir State Forces (Brown 2014). This military instrument provided the PA with the necessary muscle to enforce central decisions, monitor the loyalty of the local rulers, and maintain effective border security against Soviet or Chinese incursions. By placing the military and internal security apparatus under direct British command, the PA ensured that the foundation of sovereignty—the monopoly of legitimate force—rested firmly and solely with the imperial power. This dual-pronged approach—economic co-option of rulers and

military control via the GS—successfully dismantled the region's pluralistic sovereignty.

The systematic marginalisation of the Dogra civil administration, known as the Wazarat, was the necessary corollary of this process. British officials consistently critiqued the Dogra presence as cumbersome, corrupt, and ultimately counterproductive to the strategic goals of the lease (Sökefeld 2018). By the end of the lease period, the Dogra's influence had been reduced to a ceremonial minimum, a deliberate policy that the local Muslim population, resentful of the Dogra's historical oppression, silently applauded. This alienation of the Dogra and the centralisation of power under the PA provided a temporary, perhaps unintended, psychological relief to the locals, creating a brief political vacuum where the PA's authority was viewed as a necessary evil over the despised Dogra. This temporary acceptance, however, was predicated on the belief that the British presence was permanent, or at least long-term.

Administrative Realignment and the Policy of Alienation

The consolidation of power during the lease years was achieved through a radical administrative realignment that redefined the internal and external political boundaries of the Gilgit Agency. The central theme of this realignment was the systematic effort to detach the region, both physically and psychologically, from the Jammu and Kashmir State. This policy of alienation was critical to the British goal of securing the frontier because, in their view, the security of the Agency could not be reliably entrusted to a dependent princely state whose administration was viewed as being in perpetual disarray. The administrative structure was surgically altered to reflect this new reality of British paramountcy.

The Dogra civil administration, or Wazarat, was functionally sidelined by the Political Agent's office. While the lease formally preserved the Maharaja's territorial sovereignty, the practical reality was that all vital functions—law enforcement, revenue collection, and infrastructure development—were brought under the direct purview of the Political Agent. This jurisdictional shift created intense financial and administrative complexities, as noted by contemporary British officials like Major G.V. Gillan, who found the sharing of subsidies, road expenditures, and military costs between the Government of India and the Durbar to be "convoluted and occasionally nonsensical" (Qayyum 2013). This confusion, however, served a strategic purpose: it masked the intentional weakening of the Dogra's administrative capacity, ensuring that when the time came for the lease to expire, the J&K State would be structurally incapable of resuming effective control.

The British further pursued this policy of alienation by contesting the Maharaja's claim over the peripheral principalities of Hunza and Nagar, a move designed to cement the PA's singular control. British political correspondence in the 1930s suggested that these states were not truly part of J&K, often describing them as distinct "Indian States" or "tribal territories," separate from the main Kashmir administration (Bangash 2010). This diplomatic reframing—while largely ignored in the final constitutional settlement—demonstrates a clear intent to re-map the territory under a new sovereign narrative, one that viewed the Gilgit Agency as an entity distinct from, and strategically superior to, the J&K State. This effort at cartographic and political reclassification was essential for

enforcing a clear, unified border policy, especially with the Chinese border.

This consolidation was not just about administrative paperwork; it was about the very nature of political dominance. As Lauren Benton suggests, colonial power often thrives by creating and exploiting jurisdictional differences, and in the Gilgit Agency, the British policy was to crush these differences to create a unified jurisdictional whole (Benton 1999). By making the Political Agent the only source of authority, the British created a new political geography where loyalty, administration, and military command were centralised at the PA's desk in Gilgit town. The infrastructure built during this period—roads, communication lines, military barracks—was singularly focused on enhancing strategic logistics and military mobility, rather than on local economic development (Tharoor 2007). This physical imposition of central control underscored the political subjugation of the local rulers, who found themselves administering territories increasingly defined by British imperial necessity rather than local tradition.

The psychological impact of this policy of alienation cannot be overstated. By consistently contrasting the "efficient" British rule with the "corrupt" and "oppressive" Dogra regime, the Political Agent fostered a local narrative that equated British paramountcy with stability and the Dogra presence with misery (Sökefeld 2018). This strategic flattery provided the British with a temporary layer of local support, but it simultaneously planted the seed of deep political grievance. The local populace, overwhelmingly Muslim and ethnically distinct from the Kashmiris, came to view themselves as having a separate political destiny, one unlinked to Srinagar. The British administration, in its single-minded pursuit of frontier security, failed to provide any mechanism for this realigned political identity to be channeled constructively, thereby setting the stage for the explosive reaction that followed the sudden termination of the lease.

The meticulous nature of this singularisation effort is further evidenced by the British control over the flow of goods and people. The new border with Chinese Turkistan, imposed by the British to end Hunza's autonomous trade, necessitated official permits and visas for passage, an administrative burden that formalised the region's geopolitical isolation and submission to the PA's authority (Leitner 1996). This control over movement and commerce reaffirmed the Physical Agent's status as the ultimate sovereign, the one who held the keys to the kingdom's external gates. This consolidation, while effective for a decade, ultimately created an administrative dependency on the British that, when abruptly withdrawn, left a profound and dangerous institutional vacuum (Kreutzmann 2015). The subsequent handover revealed that the British had successfully alienated the region from the Dogra, but had failed to integrate it politically, making it an unstable, detached entity upon their departure.

The Abrupt Termination and the Inevitable Repercussions

The decade-long project of administrative singularisation and political alienation engineered by the British was violently undone by the abrupt termination of the lease agreement in 1947, a decision driven by the chaotic political expediency of Partition. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, prematurely annulled the sixty-year lease and rapidly handed the Gilgit Agency back to the Dogra regime just weeks before the partition

of the subcontinent. This hasty withdrawal, devoid of any genuine consultation with the local populace or the British-trained Gilgit Scouts officers, represented an act of political betrayal that directly precipitated the subsequent uprising (Brown 2014). The return to the Dogra was not merely a change in administration; it was the imposition of a foreign, detested authority upon a population whose political identity had been systematically detached from Srinagar by a decade of British policy.

The handover ceremony on 31 July 1947, where the Union Jack was lowered for the last time, was charged with emotional symbolism, viewed by the locals not as a transfer of power but as a catastrophic abandonment. Major William Brown, the last British commander of the Gilgit Scouts, recorded the profound sense of betrayal felt by the local people and officers, who had placed their loyalty and trust in the British Crown over the Dogra Maharaja (Brown 2001). The arrival of Brigadier Ghansara Singh, the Maharaja's hand-picked Governor, was seen by the local VCOs (Viceroy's Commissioned Officers) of the Gilgit Scouts—men like Subedar Major Babar Khan and Captain Hassan Khan—as an immediate threat to their professional prestige, political status, and, crucially, their physical safety amid the widespread massacres of Muslims elsewhere in the J&K State (Khan n.d.). The failure of Ghansara Singh to reassure these VCOs regarding their future status in the new command structure was the spark that ignited the already prepared tinderbox of local discontent.

The Gilgit Rebellion, codenamed "Datta Khel" by Major Brown and Captain Mathieson, was a confluence of localized rebellion by the VCOs and officers of the Gilgit Scouts and the deep-seated popular resentment against the Dogra rule. The rebellion was fundamentally a reaction against the reversal of the British centralisation project. The local leaders, having been accustomed to a unified, albeit imperial, sovereign (the Political Agent), fiercely resisted the reimposition of the old, fragmented system under a despised external power. The news of the Maharaja's accession to India on 26 October 1947 provided the final, immediate casus belli, confirming the local fear that they were to be permanently submerged under Hindu rule from Srinagar. Major Brown, siding with the local sentiment and against the political blunder of the British high command, became a key facilitator of the coup, ensuring the successful and almost bloodless arrest of Governor Ghansara Singh (Brown 2014).

The immediate aftermath of the coup witnessed a struggle for control and legitimacy between the Muslim officers of the Gilgit Scouts and the local civilian elites, who declared a short-lived, independent government. This internal conflict, documented in the competing claims of credit by Babar Khan and Hassan Khan, highlights the complexity of the uprising, which was driven not just by geopolitical loyalty to Pakistan but by a fierce desire for self-determination and local political control (Brown 2001). The swift declaration of accession to Pakistan, guided by Brown's immediate telegram, provided the newly liberated territory with a much-needed external anchor, validating the decade-long process of alienation from the J&K State. The rebellion, therefore, was the final, violent affirmation that the British policy of centralisation had created a distinct political entity on the frontier, one that refused to be reverted to its pre-1935 subordinate status.

The repercussions of the abrupt termination and subsequent rebellion have

echoed through the decades, fundamentally shaping the political geography of the Kashmir dispute (Bangash 2010). The British, by prioritizing a hasty exit over a responsible transfer of sovereignty, left behind a territory that was politically mobilized, militarily prepared, and deeply resentful of the Dogra regime. The Gilgit Scouts, trained and armed by the British for the purpose of maintaining a singular, centralized sovereign control, ultimately turned their instruments of centralisation against the authority that sought to reverse it. The entire episode serves as a powerful historical case study: while imperial powers may succeed in consolidating authority on the periphery for strategic reasons, the failure to provide a legitimate political identity for the newly centralised space inevitably leads to political violence when that central authority is suddenly withdrawn (Qayyum 2013).

Theoretical Contours of Colonial Centralisation

The British experience in the Gilgit Agency during the lease years offers fertile ground for examining the theoretical contours of colonial centralisation, particularly concerning the interplay of power, knowledge, and jurisdictional control. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, which posits that the West constructs the 'Orient' as 'the Other' to justify domination, finds strong resonance in the colonial literature surrounding Gilgit (Said 1994). The discourse of the British Political Agents consistently framed the Dogra administration as incapable and the local principalities as needing 'modernisation' or 'civilising,' thereby legitimizing the necessity of direct British administrative takeover in 1935. This narrative of a 'civilising mission' served as the rhetorical mask for the core strategic objective of singularisation.

Michel Foucault's concept of the 'archaeology of knowledge' is similarly illuminating, as the British produced a specific body of knowledge—reports, gazetteers, and internal memoranda—that simultaneously documented and constructed the region's political reality (Foucault 1972). This knowledge-power nexus ensured that all strategic decisions, including the subordination of the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar, were supported by an internal logic of imperial necessity. The Mir of Hunza's autonomous trade with China, for example, was reframed in official British reports not as legitimate foreign policy, but as an 'unacceptable diplomatic anomaly' that needed correction, a linguistic move that transformed a political right into a strategic deficiency. The British, therefore, did not merely *rule* Gilgit; they created a *discourse* of Gilgit as an essential, but dangerously porous, frontier that only *they* could manage.

The process of singularisation in Gilgit also highlights the colonial state's manipulation of 'legal pluralism'—the existence of multiple, overlapping legal systems—as described by scholars of colonial law (Benton 1999). Prior to 1935, the region's pluralistic sovereignty—involving Dogra, British, and local Mirs' jurisdictions—was chaotic. The British lease simplified this chaos not by integrating the systems, but by asserting the absolute paramountcy of the Political Agent's office. By financially co-opting the local rulers and militarily subordinating the Dogra Wazarat, the British effectively created a centralised, single-tier legal and administrative structure where the authority of the PA superseded all prior forms of law and tradition. This singularisation, designed to ensure swift strategic command,

was the most profound, enduring impact of the lease years.

The strategic choice to use the Gilgit Scouts, a locally recruited and British-officered force, as the primary instrument of this centralisation is a classic colonial paradox. The British policy created a local elite, the VCOs, who were granted status and power within the imperial structure, yet simultaneously alienated from the Dogra administration they were supposed to defend. When the British suddenly withdrew, this newly empowered, strategically detached elite refused to surrender their centralised power base to the despised Dogra authority (Brown 2014). Their rebellion was thus an act of self-preservation, but also a final, violent assertion of the singularised authority the British had trained them to defend—only this time, the authority was their own, or that of the newly formed Pakistan state.

The failure of the British, during their tenure, to undertake any meaningful political development beyond strategic security measures further underscores their exploitative motivation (Tharoor 2007). Unlike other areas where colonial rule saw investment in broader administrative systems, the Gilgit Agency's development was purely tactical, centered on communications and military infrastructure. This lack of genuine political integration or the creation of a local, self-governing political structure meant that when the lease was terminated, the region instantly reverted to its most fundamental political cleavage: the local Muslim population versus the Dogra outsiders. The British merely used the Dogra presence as a legal fiction to secure their frontier, and when the frontier was no longer their concern, they discarded the territory, resulting in the violent assertion of local political identity that led to the 'Gilgit Rebellion' (Ali 2019).

The Pre-Lease Political Tapestry: Dogra Conquest and the Rise of Diarchy

To fully appreciate the extent of the British centralisation project, one must understand the complex, often bloody, political tapestry that defined Gilgit prior to the 1935 lease. The region's history is characterised by the ebb and flow of local autonomous rule, notably under figures like Gohar Aman, the powerful Raja of Yasin, who successfully resisted and twice defeated the advancing Dogra forces in the mid-nineteenth century (Zain 2010). Gohar Aman's resistance cemented a tradition of local martial pride and a deep-seated political resentment towards the Dogra conquest, which was eventually solidified only after his death in 1860 and the subsequent massacres in Yasin.

The Dogra annexation of Gilgit in the 1870s was a campaign marked by brutality, but the subsequent rule was never absolute. The vast, mountainous terrain and the political independence of the peripheral states—Hunza, Nagar, Chilas, and others—meant that the Dogra rule was geographically restricted and militarily vulnerable. While the Dogra established a Governor (Wazir) in Gilgit town, the surrounding independent states maintained their own Mirs and Rajas, whose submission to the Maharaja was often merely symbolic, defined by annual, negotiated tribute payments rather than direct administrative control (Ernst and Pati 2007). This situation created a weak, porous frontier that worried the British, whose strategic interests in countering Russia began to supersede their desire to simply support their Dogra client.

The British response to this porous frontier was the establishment of the Gilgit Agency in 1889, marking the formal introduction of diarchal rule. Colonel A.G. Durrand, the first Political Agent, was tasked with monitoring Russian movements and strengthening ties with the local rulers, effectively establishing a parallel government to the Dogra's (Bangash 2010). The PA was an external security figure whose writ ran primarily through the British-controlled military and intelligence network, while the Dogra Wazarat retained nominal control over civil administration and revenue collection within the Gilgit district. This diarchy was inherently unstable, leading to perpetual bureaucratic friction, jurisdictional disputes, and the dilution of effective authority, a scenario that the Dogra administration often exploited to resist British interference.

This pre-1935 tension was precisely the problem the British sought to resolve through the lease. The Dogra reluctance to fully cooperate with the British security demands, coupled with the continued diplomatic ambiguity of Hunza and Nagar's ties to China, meant that the imperative of strategic security was constantly undermined by administrative friction (Sökefeld 2018). The lease, therefore, was not aimed at introducing Dogra rule, but rather at neutralizing it. By coercing the Maharaja into temporarily surrendering all civil and military control to the PA, the British executed a subtle political coup, ensuring that the unified command structure they required for frontier defence could be implemented without the legal complications of annexing J&K territory. The centralisation project of 1935 thus began with the administrative decapitation of the Dogra influence.

The British had also established the Gilgit Scouts in 1913, an auxiliary force distinct from the J&K State Forces, which further deepened this diarchal divide (Qayyum 2013). Composed of local men and led by British officers, the Scouts were loyal to the PA, not the Maharaja. This created an institutionalized military rivalry at the heart of the Gilgit administration, ensuring that the British had an instrument of force separate from the Dogra forces stationed at Bunji. When the lease was signed, the Gilgit Scouts seamlessly transitioned into the primary instrument of the PA's singularized authority. The entire pre-lease period, therefore, was a gradual, managed build-up toward the 1935 lease, which served as the final administrative key to unlocking the full potential of British central control over the strategic apex of the Indian Empire.

Economic Dimensions of Singularisation: Trade Routes and Subsidies

Beyond the overt geopolitical and administrative rationales, the British project of centralisation in the Gilgit Agency was underpinned by crucial economic motivations, specifically the control and regulation of trans-Himalayan trade routes. The location of Gilgit, connecting Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Chinese Turkistan, made it a nexus for valuable commerce, and control over these arteries was a critical component of imperial strategy (Kreutzmann 2015). The pluralistic and semi-independent nature of the peripheral states, which allowed them to maintain autonomous trade and diplomatic ties, was viewed by the British as an economic as well as a political threat, necessitating the singularisation of authority under the Political Agent.

The most potent example of this economic centralisation was the policy directed at the Mir of Hunza. Historically,

Hunza benefited from a significant degree of financial and political independence derived from its control over the Wakhan Corridor and its trade interactions with Sinkiang. The Mir received a yearly tribute from the Chinese Amban, and collected grazing fees in the Tagdambash Pamir, providing a source of revenue entirely outside the control of either the Dogra or the British (Etherton 1911). This autonomy undermined the British goal of creating a completely closed and controllable frontier. The 1935 lease provided the leverage needed to forcibly integrate this economic artery into the British system.

The incentives provided to the Mir—enhanced annual subsidies and the *jageer* in Bagrot Nallah—were not mere bribes, but calculated buyouts of his independent economic sovereignty (Qayyum 2013). By accepting the augmented stipend, the Mir forfeited his ancestral rights to the Chinese tribute and the grazing fees, effectively exchanging volatile, autonomous frontier revenue for a stable, subordinate income guaranteed by the paramount power. This act transformed the key trade routes from avenues of independent local commerce into officially sanctioned, centrally monitored transit points, subject to the regulations and taxes of the Political Agent's administration. This was an economic singularisation, ensuring that the financial benefits of the region flowed directly through British-controlled channels.

Furthermore, the centralisation of revenue collection and civil administration under the PA reduced the financial power of the Dogra Wazarat. The British, viewing the Dogra administration as financially inefficient and prone to corruption, preferred to place the region's limited tax and land revenue directly under their own fiscally responsible officers (Sökefeld 2018). This financial control allowed the PA to allocate resources strategically, primarily funding the expansion and maintenance of military infrastructure, roads, and the Gilgit Scouts—all expenditures that served the imperial strategic purpose. Local economic development, beyond what was necessary to sustain the military garrison, remained negligible, underscoring the instrumental and exploitative nature of the British tenure (Tharoor 2007).

The economic dimension of the lease years reveals that centralisation was a multi-layered imperial strategy. It was simultaneously about military defence, political control, and economic regulation. By establishing the Political Agent as the singular sovereign, the British gained not only a military buffer but also an absolute monopoly over the region's external economic relations and internal financial management. This complete control over the economic machinery was integral to the broader centralisation project, eliminating all nodes of autonomous financial power that might have resisted the imposition of a unified imperial command. The financial dependency created by the subsidies and the new administrative structure ensured that the local rulers, the most potent threat to the PA's singular authority, remained compliant and thoroughly integrated into the British system.

Conclusion

The British lease of the Gilgit Agency between 1935 and 1947 stands as a powerful case study in the strategic centralisation of colonial authority on a critical geopolitical frontier. Driven initially by the existential threat of Soviet communism and the enduring anxieties of the 'Great Game,' the lease served as the legal and political mechanism through which the British systematically dismantled the complex,

pluralistic sovereignty of the region. The central argument—that the British exploited this strategic necessity to pursue a deliberate policy of administrative singularisation—is borne out by the evidence: the Political Agent was transformed into the sole sovereign, the independent foreign ties of Hunza and Nagar were terminated through strategic buyouts, and all peripheral tribal territories were brought under direct PA/APA control (Qayyum 2013; Ali 2019). This calculated centralisation effectively erased the pre-existing diarchal tensions, creating a unified, militarily capable, and politically alienated entity detached from the Dogra state.

The fundamental flaw in this centralized design lay in its sudden, politically expedient reversal. The premature termination of the lease by Lord Mountbatten in 1947, dictated by the chaotic logistics of Partition, reversed a decade of administrative and psychological detachment and reintroduced the despised, incompetent Dogra regime (Brown 2014). The local population, and crucially, the British-trained elite of the Gilgit Scouts, refused to surrender the centralized power base they had come to control under the PA, viewing the handover as an act of political abandonment and a threat to their survival. The resulting Gilgit Rebellion was therefore not merely an opportunistic act of war but the inevitable political culmination of the British singularisation project: a centralized, militarily capable frontier entity, once severed from its Kashmiri political roots, refused to be forcibly reattached to a resented external authority, choosing instead to assert its own, newly defined political destiny (Bangash 2010).

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