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Appropriating Territories For Imperial Interests

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Abstract:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British Empire in India was at its pinnacle. Only few portions of the north India, formally constituting the domains of Ranjeet Singh, were yet to be brought under British paramountcy. Very soon these alluring regions acquired a greater importance for being a natural border land, and created necessary pushes and pulls to implant colonial rule there as well. Through a number of travelogues, maintained by the European travellers, who visited these regions in the guise of hypocritical travelers, the secrets associated with these lands were revealed. More essentially the travel accounts developed by Victor Jacquemont and Baron Charles Hugel emphasized the need to conquer these vital regions. The present paper traces how these two travel narratives particularly, not just demonstrated, but powerfully asserted that the impoverished lands and the decadent subjects of Lahore Darbar need a touch of messianic British rule. Besides with the objective of motivating the British intervention, the geo-political, geo-strategic, and military-cum economic potentialities of these regions was stressed in such a way that in subsequent years, all these lands became the focus of imperial business.

KEYWORDS:

Climax of British imperialism, Natural border land, Impoverished lands and decadent subjects of Lahore Darbar, Messianic British rule and Geo-strategic Potentialities.

INTRODUCTION:-

During the 19th century when India had acquired a position of a valuable colony for England, its northern part comprised of Lahore, Punjab, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh were chiefly serving as border lands for the British possessions in India. All these regions as border lands and more particularly the state of Jammu and Kashmir, was truly a shock absorbent zone for colonial government of India. Comparatively it was much later that these regions acquired a great importance for the British government of India. After remaining outside the orbits of imperial domination for a prolonged period, it was only by the middle of the 19th century that these regions attracted the attention of British government of India to enhance its influence over these regions. The chief reasons ascribed to this kind of development so far mainly takes into account the amazing growth of power of czarist Russia and her successive victories in central Asia. Moreover, some scholars presume the consistent threat from the side of China, and the aggressive policies pursued by the Amirs of Afghanistan collectively created the ideal conditions of confrontation where the three empires meet. While it is difficult to refute these factors, the role of travel narratives that stressed the prominent position and possible chances for the colonial intervention in these lands, cannot be neglected either. It was in fact the travel accounts maintained by the European travellers that in real sense contributed in the emergence of these particular regions as border lands, necessary for the continuation of imperial domination of British over entire Indian sub-continent. A good number of travellers visited these regions and stressed the need to secure a scientific border to combat the aggressive policies of Russia. During the early years of nineteenth century the Europeans travellers encountered these lands and their interaction with the people and other observations find a fine expression in the travel accounts they maintained. Of

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these travel narratives, the two major travel accounts that more possibly attracted the intention of imperial Britain towards these regions were maintained by victor Jacquemont and Baron Charles Hugel. Particularly, thesetwo essential travel accounts in their own way emphasized the need to conquer these regions under the rubric of civilization mission and on account of geo-strategic significance of these regions for the British possessions in India.

Prior to the emergence of these regions as a focal point of imperial business in the north India, these regions comprised of Punjab, Lahore, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh were constituting collectively the Sikh Empire, largely known as Lahore Darbar. Under the sovereignty of Ranjeet Singh, these regions had hardly attracted the imaginations of imperial Britain until the conditions were created by a set of factors. The colonial government of India was presuming that these regions were barren, less productive and difficult to govern and it would be a futile exercise to extend the British rule over them. But the imperial policies of Russia toward the early decades of nineteenth shows no signs of decline and her drastic move toward the northern borders of India, and her interventionist agenda in the central Asia and Afghanistan, consequently added to the worries of British in India. But still somewhat the British government of India was not ready to move for establishing the British paramountancy over these regions.

To go for the enhancement of imperial influence of British government over these regions, the prime requirement of the times was first, to liquidate the powers of Lahore Darbar. As formidable power, Lahore Darbar during the times of Ranjeet was enough powerful to repulse any move of colonial government that tries to underestimate his sovereign powers. Under such circumstances, there was even the lack of sufficient knowledge regarding these regions, which from the colonial state's point of view was necessary before advancing for any territorial occupation. Consequently to derive the necessarily information about these frontier regions, serving as the part of Ranjeet Singh's empire the colonial government of India resorted to an indirect method. By sending a European traveler other than British by nationality, an ample amount of knowledge was acquired, that served as a necessary ingredient for imperial mobilizations in these regions.

First in the long line of these Europeans who visited the various provinces of Lahore Darbar, was a French traveler named victor Jacquemont (1829-32). By birth he was French and his travel to India was directed and facilitated directly by authorities at Britain. On his arrival in India, he was well received by Lord William Bentick, the then utilitarian governor general of India. His encounter with the lands he visited in the northern India and the people he met as the subjects of Lahore Darbar, found a fine expression in his travel accounts. While travelling in the various provinces of Lahore, he wrote many letters to his father, friends and relatives through the hands of British agents. An anthology of these letters was later on published under the title, 'Letters from India,' which constitutes an important place in the colonial discourse on India. Being a European with non-British nationality, he could hardly come under the sever scanner of Ranjeet Singh, of whom it is said, he hardly permits any dubious European to visit his territories.

White man's burden approach

A deep study of his travel narrations reveals the fact that his travel was not an outcome of curiosity to know about the different parts of the world. But rather his close ties with the English East India Company were the prime motives to send him to India. Consequently he forms relations with the then colonial government, his European cultural background, his acquaintance with the Mill's discourse on India and more predominantly the Utilitarian philosophy constitutes the set of factors that limited his attitude towards these regions and had drastically even conditioned the nature of his descriptions. Additionally the French loss in India too, had its due share that led him to project the inhabitants of East as civilizationally inferior. And more importantly as Jacquemont was an honored guest of the British administration in India so he was bound to praise the efforts of the British to bring comfort to what he perceived as an impoverished and oppressed India. At the time he initiated the process to gather his itinerary reports, he was well aware of the fact how colonial government is ruling over the Indians under the rubric of mission civilisatrice, a rule that is finally going to leave the India once they will become the masters of own destiny. This kind of milieu too affected his mode of expressing the things he observed during his travels.

Jacquemont therefore, writing under the influence of all these limitations, has proved to be man with full prejudices. Almost entire East and the human societies associated with it appeared to him living a miserable life full of superstitions, deviations and morally corrupt. More specifically however, the picture of Lahore Darbar and the provinces associated with it such as Punjab, Jammu, Ladakh, and Kashmir that arises after reading his travel narrations is by and large a gloomy one. With great pride and confidence in his superior 'self' as a European, Jacquemont narrates almost everything in bleak colours. He was so much constructive in his psychology that he maintains, European civilization deserves to spread through the universe, and in the default of civilizations of the west its mere dominations will benefit to the peoples in

other parts of the world, it is probably the one which the religious institutions of the East permitted to confer upon it.

It is obvious from his travel narrations that one of the prime objectives of his travel was to discover about the occurrence of any possible alliance between the Ranjeet Singh, then guardian of Lahore Darbar, and the Amirs of Afghanistan which he rejected at the very outset by proclaiming the very idea is a comic one. In the same vein while proceeding ahead, Jacquemont praises the powers and blessings associated with the rise of Britishdomination. For the enemies of British Empire, his account bears not a single grain of respect. For instance, regarding the Afghansthe perpetual source of British in the north-western regions, he says, that bellicose nation which has often invaded India is now no strong, and the days of Mahmud Gaznvi and Timur are gone by. Such vivid remarks of haughty language certainly constitute the major portion of his travelogue, and a great lacuna as well.

Jacquemont's work reveals a person who worked in favour of colonial authorities. Throughout his account in an unhesitant manner, he asserts that the regions he visited need the blessings of British rule. The colonial government of India seems to him the only remedy to overcome the problems suffered by the people who lived in these frontier regions. The way he has commented upon the political aspects he found prevalent in these regions, it seems the entire Sikh administration therefore reflects a perfect model of Asiatic despotism. A state whose subjects, he found suffering under the crushing taxation. And almost everyone in such anarchic situations appeared to him leading a life of distrust and full of discomfort. Without losing any time, he compares this situation with that he found prevalent in British India by passing a fictitious statement that, 'thought the government of India is despotic in theory (and necessary so), in reality it is as free as in Europe.' Simultaneously he even dubs Sikhs as the rapacious masters, running a sort of segmentary state with feudalistic tendencies, wherein chaos, confusion, and problems of law and order dominated the socio-political landscape. Attributes and essential features of a welfare state seem to him inherently absent in the regions that constituted the Sikh empire. And Ranjeet Singh in person seems to him not a saint, but a hypocrite whom he prefers to call repeatedly, a Napoleon Bonaparte in miniature.

The valley of Kashmir which was also one of the essential provinces of Lahore Darbar at the time of Jacquemont's visit, has received a 'constructive' description. He described, Kashmir is a land of knaves, scoundrels, bandits, but I am prudent. Nothing is commoner than to kill a man for the sake of stealing an old pair of breeches worth twenty or twenty four sous, half a rupee; the hole population goes about armed with sabres, which they wield, I am told, with great skill and the figures one meets on the road all carry long matchlocks on their shoulders though in my opinion these are not very alarming.

This way Jacquemont's travel narrations is fully confirming the doubts expressed by Edward said in his seminal work 'Orientalism' regarding the 'otherness' of non-European lands and people through the hands of Europeans. Even one easily extracts from such accounts that representations never used to be neutral, but politically charged and culturally located, well enough to serve the lineages of colonial power.

APPROACH OF STRESSING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Another travel narrative that belongs to the same period is however, in contrast to the views expressed by Jacquemont. The travel narrative furnished by the baron Charles Hugel (1835-36), both in terms of content and nature contains less resemblance with the former. Baron Charles Hugel, a German by nationality, who visited the various provinces of Lahore Darbar and produced his experiences in the form of travelogue which was later on published under the title, 'Travels in Kashmir and Punjab.' To a less critical eye, it appears as naturalist the chief objective of his travels was next to nothing, but to go in pursuit of gathering knowledge about the flora and fauna that grows in the lap of Himalayas. But a critical study of his travelogue reveals that directly or indirectly he secured timely required information for the British government of India. In the very preface of his travelogue, Hugel elaborately narrates the objective of his travel as:

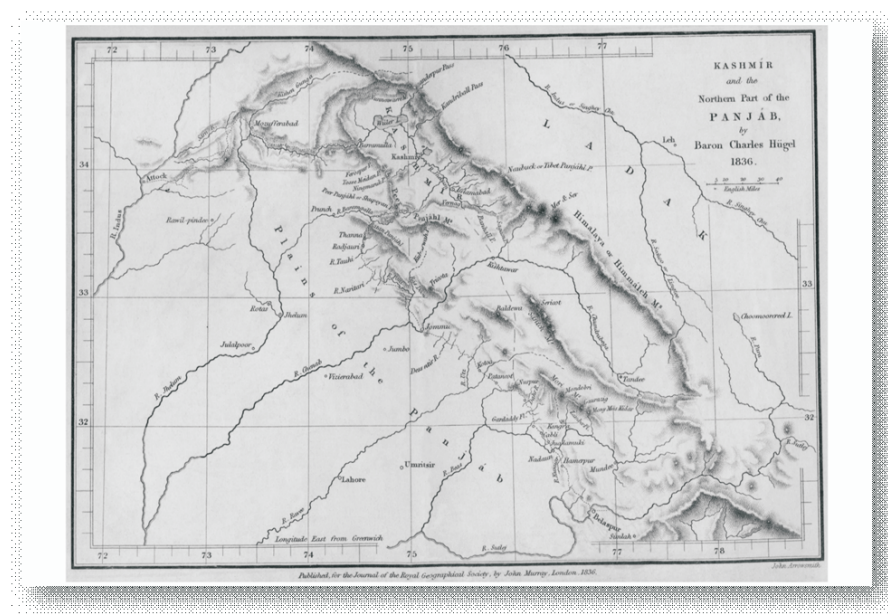
The principle object of his work is not to investigate who inhabited the 'earthly paradise' first, not to seek the birthplace of some one great individual, not to search for the favoured spot trodden by the common progenitor of all, but to explore the present state of a country which was strategically of great significance to the British government, and also to study the peculiarities of a nation.

The study of the main things that constitutes the subject matter of the travel narrations of Hugel is quite interesting. In his scheme of observation and expression he has not resorted to the practice of portraying these lands, associated with the Sikh empire, as civilizationally inferior or culturally backward. Nor is there anything serious that sounds highly concerned about to the norms of society as such. Quite interestingly rather, what is obvious from his account is a wit, a deliberative attempt to motivate the British conquest of these regions. To persuade the British conquest of these regions, he had adopted a three dimensional systematic approach and has selectively focused broadly over the following themes:

- 1.Exploration of the geo-political and strategic significance of the state.
- 2.Demonstration of the fact that economically the regions under the Lahore are economically prosperous.
- 3.To portray the Lahore durbar military as a potential threat for British India.

APPROACH OF STRESSING STRATEGIC LOCATION OF LAHORE DARABR

By using his cartographic techniques, Jacquemont presented a map of Kashmir valley and its adjoining area, a significant portion of the Lahore Darbar. Here, it seems the prime motive of Jacquemont as a traveller-cartographer was to stress, what he said earlier, as the geo-strategic importance of frontier



regions.

Further in his another article, which was published in Journal of the Royal Geographical of London, he almost narrates the same in words:

The following pages contain materials for much interesting inquiry on the subject; they were written during a journey which detained me some years from Europe, and as the country of the Sikhs with which Kashmir is now incorporated, must necessarily be frequently introduced to the reader's notice while describing it, I resolved to give some account of a kingdom which, as being the only state of importance adjoining British India, cannot fail to interest Europe in general.

His descriptions even involves an introductory summary of passes that makes one's access possible even to the far-flung regions like Kashmir valley, the north extreme of north India. Many passes such as Banderpur pass, Kandiball pass, Naubuck pass, Sagam pass, Banhall pass, Kulnarwah pass, Shopian pass, Ningmaruktera pass, Punch pass, Tossamaidan pass, Ferozpur pass and Baramullah pass have been mentioned in his travelogue.

APPROACH OF STRESSING MILITARY POTENTIALITIES OF LAHORE DARBAR

Jacquemont's travel account is essential for giving a detailed account of military capabilities of Sikh rule. For the first time, he put forward for the consideration of colonial government of India, an elaborate description of the military potentialities of Lahore Darbar. His elegant speculations regarding the military and defense capabilities of Sikh regime, constitutes such a predominant theme that it has occupied a greater portion of his travel narrative. Remarkably, his account is full of depiction of various forts of Sikh kingdom such as the fort of Bala, fortress of Patankota, Haripoor, Bahadurpoor, Futihpoor, Narpoor and Champa. All these forts, according to his observation, have a strategic importance as they were erected in those areas, which were considered militarily sensitive and vulnerable in case of any aggression from

outside.

With this military might Ranjeet Singh's empire seems to Hugel, a greater threat to the British endeavors in northern India. Not just militarily even financially, he declares Ranjeet Singh the guardian of sound kingdom, has concentrated enormous powers in his hands. Economically, he goes on to say, throughout his territory, Ranjeet is free to levy whatever taxes that pleases him. Further Hugel affirms, together all such factors consequently had added to his enormous powers and rebellious tendencies. It is, therefore, he further acclaims, 'in such matters that every Indian invested with power is an absolute tyrant, and considers all things on earth as made to obey the strongest. In a detailed fashion, he has furnished the following information regarding the Ranjeet, his army and economic position:

The troops consisted of some regular infantry. They wore red jackets and carried matchlocks. They marched by in order. But what particularly attracted me was the sight of the Maharajas favourite horse, drawn up between the tent and the troops, twenty five or thirty in number. The breed in the Punjab is very peculiar, and not unlike that of Spain, but with straighter noses. The animals are large and their movement was very gentle. They may be trained to exclude the most graceful curvettings, and the Sikhs value them according to their proficiency in their movements. But I suspect that they have not much spirit, owing to the state of repose in which they are actually kept, being from their very birth consigned to the care of a groom, and fastened by means of two robes round the head and two on the hind feet, to small pegs. In this manner their life is passed in the open air, and they are very rarely mounted. Many are born white. To the artist, who is not a painter of horses, these animals present a beautiful appearance with their small bones, flowing man and tale and their proud and fiery action and lofty heads. The passion of Ranjeet Singh for horses passed into a proverb in the East. The bridle, saddle, and other ornaments of these creatures are mostly costly. The first is overlaid with gold or enamel, and at the top of the head, or else either side, weaves a plume of heron's feathers. Stressing of jewels, are hung round the neck, under which are the Sulimans, or Onyx stones, very highly prized on account of the superstition attached to them. The saddle is also of enamel or gold, covered with precious stones, the pommel being particularly rich. The housings are of Kashmir shawl, fringed with gold. The erupper (Sic.) and martingale ornamented very highly and on each side of the favourite, usually hangs and the tale of the Tibetan yak, dyed of various hues. The saddle, moreover, is covered with a velvet cushion.

The military strength of Ranjeet Singh's empire, according to his estimate, includes a total number of 80,905 soldiers. In the same vein next, quite persuasively, he declares, Ranjeet Singh is the Soul which animates the entire body and after Ranjeet's death, disorder and anarchy will become the fate of inhabitants in his kingdom, until the whole area would become a portion of the vast dominions of British India. Regarding the itinerary reports of Victor Jacquemont who travelled in the regions of Kashmir and Punjab before him, in an insulting manner Hugel questions their creditability. He calls them quite fictitious in nature. About the writings of Jacquemont, Hugel further confesses that Jacquemont never said a truer word in his life than when he called Ranjeet Singh's soldiers the laziest, well for nothing rascals on the earth. Sikh army while administering the Kashmir valley, has appeared to him highly united, strong and capable and of course, well trained as well.

APPROACH OF FOCUSING OVER THE FINANCIAL CAPABILITIES OF LAHORE DARBAR

On projecting the valley of Kashmir in economic terms, Hugel acknowledges the fact that the kingdom founded by Ranjeet Singh may seem of little importance compared with the vast territory of Britain in Asia, but it is by no means insignificant in reality. He confirms Ranjeet Singh enjoys a total collection of 124, 03,900 rupees as revenue from his kingdom. All the territories of Lahore Darbar that Hugel visited seemed to him highly fertile. He described Kashmir and its surrounding area a cultivated country, bestowed with a number of soft streams. While rejecting the existing notions about these regions, Hugel questions the authenticity of Jacquemont who speaks of the utter destitution of people. Contrary to all this his observations made him to say, that in Punjab we may best judge of the great happiness enjoyed by the natives of Hindustan under British domination, "I confess I saw no such signs of misery. When a stranger can only get bearers at a high price, and is forced to pay down the money in advance, when he sees the natives well clothed, and evidently well fed, nay, more independent, even proud in their bearing, how can he conclude that they are so wretched?" Hugel persistently opines, "On the journey I observed that, instead of carrying the produce of their fields on their heads, as usual, they had horses with, which were well laden into the bargain." In the same persuading mode he affirms:

While in India, and especially in the Deccan, I had seen numbers of men of scrambling to be hired, at the rate of a pice per Kos; here I found it necessary to pay eight annas, or thirty two pice, for the day's work, surely no proof of poverty in the country.

In his travel narrations one can obviously observe his subjective bias, for having in mind the

objective to persuade the British to inaugurate an aggressive policy of imperialism against Ranjeet Singh's kingdom. Possibly, it is due these things in mind that he tries even to motivate the British by some sort sexual descriptions as well. Evidences of such kind are also there in his travel narrations. For instance, he acclaims, the women of Punjab are celebrated, and not undeservedly, for the beauty of their shape, their feet and, their teeth. Similarly to attract the colonizers through sexual gaze, he has laid down, "in the river, a troop of females, chiefly Kashmiri, were refreshing themselves by bathing; they are much fairer and more finely formed than the natives of Jammu. Much passionately, on another occasion, while referring to their singing and dancing practices, Hugel acknowledges a certain degree of charm. All, this stands Hugel in contrast to the travel account, developed by Victor Jacquemont, for the latter described the women in Kashmir is extremely ugly and a hideous wretch. Hugel has also quoted some couplets of what they were singing:

Thou art my soul; thou art my word.
I who please thee here am thy slave.
But thou art silent; thy heart is of stone.
It is cold for me; it will never be mine.

CONCLUSION

The critical analysis of aforementioned travel narratives reveals the fact that in their encounter with the provinces of Lahore Darbar, both the travelers in their own way have bring forth two different genres of travel accounts. Both however, have seized to be neutral. The basic aim of these travels had been to produce such accounts that could lure and legitimize the intervention of colonial government in these lands. The first one wants to show that the superior European political regime could only bring some improvement in the anarchic and autocratic territorial domains of Lahore Darbar. And the second one plays a crucial role in revealing the geo-political, financial and military capabilities of the Lahore Darbar. The essential point they stress is presumably that not only from the cultural and civilizational point of view, but even in materialistic perspective colonial occupation of such an immense area would be beneficial for colonial government of India.

¹Bamazai, P.N.K (1994) Cultural and Political History of Kashmir, New Delhi: Md Publications, P.613

²Bowman, Linda (2011). "Travelers' tales: Great Game Narratives" p.2

³Bamazi, cultural and Political History of Kashmir, p.614

⁴Victor Jacquemont, (1834) Letters from India. Describing a journey in the British Dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore, and Cashmere during the years 1828, 1829, 1830, 1831, p.233: Jacquemont's letters were first published in English since he was on a trip which was sponsored by the Royal Asiatic Society. Indebted to his English patrons, his letters carried an introduction by his English publisher which frankly avowed the value of his work as an impartial 'judge of British rule in India, even an unwilling advocate 'by virtue of his being from France which had been defeated in India by Britain. See *ibid*: introduction.

⁵Mohan, Jyoti (2010) Claiming India: French scholars and their preoccupations with India During the Nineteenth Century, introduction, p.18

⁶Jacquemont, Letters from India, p. 206-207

⁷*Ibid*.p.105

⁸*Ibid*.p.106

⁹*Ibid*.p.102

¹⁰*Ibid*.p.174

¹¹*Ibid*.p.215

¹²Said W. Edward (1978), Orientalism, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul

¹³Cited in shafi Shouq et al, (1997) Europeans on Kashmir, Srinagar: Summit, p.37

¹⁴Hugel, Baron Charless, 'Notice to the Himaleh Mountains and the Valley of Kashmir in 1835' Journal of the Royal Geographical of London, vol.6.1836, p. 343-349

¹⁵*Ibid*. 350

¹⁶Hugel, Baron Charles. (1845), Travels in Kashmir and Punjab, London: John Petheran, pp.24-26

¹⁷*Ibid*.p.26

¹⁸*Ibid*.p.301-302

¹⁹*Ibid*.p.75

²⁰*Ibid*.p.76

²¹*Ibid*.p.345

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