



Vol. 4 No. 5 (May) (2026)

## **British Colonial Administration In Gilgit Agency (1886–1947)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the administrative structure and political governance of the Gilgit Agency between 1901 and 1935 under British colonial rule. The study analyzes how the British transformed Gilgit from a loosely controlled frontier territory into a strategically organized administrative outpost of the British Indian Empire. Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Chinese Turkestan, the Gilgit Agency held immense geopolitical significance during the period of Anglo-Russian rivalry known as the “Great Game.” The research explores the system of dual administration in which the Dogra Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir retained nominal sovereignty while real authority rested with the British Political Agent. It further investigates the establishment of the Gilgit Scouts in 1913, the use of intelligence and surveillance networks, the development of roads, telegraph systems, and military infrastructure, and the role of local rulers under indirect colonial control. The paper also highlights how the British blended customary tribal practices with colonial judicial mechanisms to maintain stability in the frontier region. Special attention is given to British relations with Hunza, Nagar, Punial, Darel, and Tangir, where subsidies, diplomacy, and strategic surveillance were used to secure loyalty and prevent external influence. Using archival sources, official reports, gazetteers, and historical literature, the study argues that British administration in Gilgit was primarily motivated by strategic and security concerns rather than economic development. Although limited social and economic changes emerged through infrastructure, education, and trade, the region remained militarized and politically controlled. The paper concludes that the administrative practices introduced during this period laid the foundation for the later 1935 lease agreement and continued to influence governance structures in the region beyond the end of colonial rule in 1947.

**Keywords:** Gilgit Agency, British India, Colonial Administration, Great Game,

### **Introduction**

The Gilgit Agency occupied a significant position in the strategic frontier policy of British India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Located at the junction of Central Asia, China, Afghanistan, and the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit emerged as one of the most sensitive frontier regions of the British Empire. Its mountainous geography and proximity to Russian-controlled territories made it strategically important in the context of the Anglo-Russian rivalry commonly known as the “Great Game” (Hopkirk, 1990). British policymakers feared that Russian expansion toward Central Asia could eventually threaten the security of British India; therefore, the



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northern frontier became a major concern of imperial defense policy (Yapp, 1980).

Before the establishment of formal British control, Gilgit remained under the nominal authority of the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir after the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846. However, Dogra administration in the region remained weak due to geographical isolation, tribal resistance, and limited administrative resources (Rai, 2004). Local rulers in Hunza, Nagar, Punial, Yasin, and Chilas often challenged Dogra authority, creating political instability throughout the region (Dani, 1989). The British closely monitored these developments because they viewed instability in Gilgit as a possible opportunity for Russian political influence in the region (Warikoo, 1989).

In response to growing strategic concerns, the British established the Gilgit Agency in 1889 to strengthen frontier administration and intelligence operations. Through the appointment of Political Agents and the introduction of indirect rule, the British gradually transformed Gilgit into a frontier buffer zone designed to protect India's northern boundaries (Durand, 1899). The Agency functioned as both an administrative and military outpost where local rulers were controlled through treaties, subsidies, and political supervision. At the same time, British officers developed intelligence networks, communication routes, and military institutions such as the Gilgit Scouts to secure the frontier passes and monitor regional developments (Barthorp, 2002).

The British colonial administration in Gilgit differed from direct colonial governance in other parts of India. Instead of complete annexation, the British adopted a hybrid administrative structure that combined indirect rule with strategic military oversight. This system allowed the British to maintain political influence while minimizing administrative costs and local resistance (Sökefeld, 2005). The policies implemented in Gilgit reflected broader imperial frontier strategies used in other border regions such as Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), where political control depended heavily on alliances with local elites and tribal intermediaries (Marsden, 2008). The signing of the 1935 lease agreement between the British Government and the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir further strengthened British authority in Gilgit. Under this arrangement, the British assumed direct administrative control over the Gilgit Agency for sixty years, primarily due to increasing geopolitical tensions in Central Asia and concerns over Soviet influence (Lamb, 1991). During the final phase of colonial rule, British administration focused heavily on military preparedness, communication infrastructure, and frontier security, especially during the Second World War (Dani, 1989).

### Literature Review

The historical development of the Gilgit Agency and British frontier administration has been examined from colonial, strategic, and postcolonial perspectives. Early colonial writers such as Biddulph (1880) and Durand (1899) provided descriptive accounts of the geography, tribes, and political conditions of Gilgit and neighboring frontier regions. Their writings primarily reflected the British imperial perspective, portraying the region as politically unstable and strategically vulnerable. These works emphasized the importance of British intervention for maintaining order and securing India's northern frontier. Although these colonial narratives remain valuable historical sources, they often justified imperial expansion and overlooked local political agency (Biddulph, 1880; Durand, 1899).

The strategic importance of Gilgit has been widely discussed within the broader context of the "Great Game," the geopolitical rivalry between Britain and Russia in Central Asia. Historians such as Hopkirk (1990) and Yapp (1980) argue that British policies in Gilgit



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were primarily motivated by fears of Russian expansion toward India. According to these studies, the establishment of the Gilgit Agency represented part of Britain's larger frontier defense strategy designed to create buffer zones along the northern borders of India. Hopkirk (1990) describes Gilgit as a "watchtower of empire," while Yapp (1980) highlights the role of intelligence networks and frontier diplomacy in British strategic planning. These studies demonstrate that British involvement in Gilgit was closely connected to imperial security concerns rather than economic interests.

Scholars focusing on Kashmir and frontier politics have also examined the relationship between the British Government and the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir. Rai (2004) argues that although Gilgit formally remained under Dogra sovereignty after the Treaty of Amritsar (1846), British influence steadily increased through political intervention and administrative supervision. Similarly, Lamb (1991) explains that the British gradually reduced the practical authority of the Maharaja in frontier affairs, particularly after the re-establishment of the Gilgit Agency in 1889 and the 1935 lease agreement. These studies reveal how the British maintained indirect control by preserving nominal Dogra authority while exercising real political and military power in the region.

Modern scholarship has increasingly focused on the local impact of colonial administration in Gilgit-Baltistan. Dani (1989) highlights how British rule transformed the political and administrative structure of the region through the introduction of Political Agents, military forces, and centralized frontier governance. Sökefeld (2005) further argues that colonial administrative systems reshaped local power relations by integrating local rulers into a broader framework of imperial control. According to Sökefeld, British indirect rule relied heavily on alliances with local elites, subsidies, and military supervision, creating long-term political structures that continued after 1947. Kreutzmann (2015) also emphasizes the importance of trade routes, communication systems, and cross-border interactions in understanding the strategic value of Gilgit within High Asia.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative historical research methodology based on archival and documentary analysis. Primary sources include official British records, gazetteers, political reports, and travel accounts related to the Gilgit Agency. Secondary sources such as books and research articles on British frontier policy, the Great Game, and Gilgit-Baltistan are also utilized. Through historical and thematic analysis, the research examines the administrative structure, military system, and political strategies of British colonial rule in Gilgit between 1886 and 1947.

### **Research Questions**

Why did the British establish the Gilgit Agency in 1889?

How did British colonial administration function in Gilgit between 1886 and 1947?

What role did military and intelligence institutions play in British frontier policy?

How did British rule influence the political and administrative structure of Gilgit?

What long-term impact did British colonial administration leave on the region?

### **Historical Background of Gilgit Before British Rule**

Before the establishment of British control, Gilgit was governed through local rulers and tribal authorities who exercised limited political influence over scattered valleys and mountain communities. Due to its geographical location at the crossroads of Central Asia, China, Afghanistan, and Kashmir, the region remained strategically important for



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regional powers throughout history (Dani, 1989). During the nineteenth century, the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir extended their authority into Gilgit after the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846. However, Dogra administration remained weak because of difficult terrain, tribal resistance, and limited military resources (Rai, 2004).

At the same time, Russian expansion into Central Asia increased British fears regarding the security of India's northern frontier. British policymakers believed that Gilgit could become an important route for foreign influence or military penetration into British India (Hopkirk, 1990). These geopolitical concerns, combined with the inability of the Dogra administration to maintain effective control, encouraged the British to increase their political and military involvement in the region. Consequently, Gilgit gradually emerged as a central frontier zone within British imperial strategy during the late nineteenth century (Warikoo, 1989).

### **Establishment of the Gilgit Agency**

The British established the Gilgit Agency in 1889 to strengthen their political and military presence along the northern frontier of British India. The growing rivalry between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, commonly known as the "Great Game," increased British concerns regarding the security of the Himalayan border regions (Hopkirk, 1990). British officials feared that Russian expansion toward Central Asia could threaten India through the mountain passes of Gilgit. As a result, the British decided to create a permanent political and administrative system in the region to monitor frontier activities and secure strategic routes (Yapp, 1980).

Although Gilgit formally remained under the authority of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, real administrative power increasingly shifted to British Political Agents after the establishment of the Agency (Lamb, 1991). The British developed relations with local rulers in Hunza, Nagar, Punial, and Yasin through treaties, subsidies, and political alliances. This system of indirect rule enabled the British to maintain influence without complete annexation of the region (Durand, 1899). The establishment of the Gilgit Agency marked the beginning of organized British colonial administration in Gilgit and transformed the region into an important frontier outpost of the British Empire (Dani, 1989).

### **Administrative Structure of the Gilgit Agency**

The administrative structure of the Gilgit Agency was designed to secure British strategic interests while maintaining indirect political control over the region. After the establishment of the Agency in 1889, the British introduced a frontier administration system headed by a Political Agent who represented British authority in Gilgit. Although the region officially remained under the sovereignty of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, the British Political Agent exercised significant influence over political, military, and diplomatic matters (Lamb, 1991). This arrangement allowed the British to control frontier affairs without formally annexing the territory. The Political Agent maintained close relations with local rulers and supervised communication between frontier states and the British Indian government (Durand, 1899).

The Gilgit Agency operated under a dual administrative structure in which both British and Dogra authorities shared responsibilities. The Maharaja of Kashmir appointed governors and officials for civil administration, taxation, and judicial matters, while the British Political Agent controlled defense, foreign relations, and intelligence operations (Dani, 1989). In practice, British officers gradually became more influential because of their military resources and direct connection with the Government of India. Local rulers



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of Hunza, Nagar, Punial, and Yasin were allowed limited autonomy under British supervision, provided they remained loyal to imperial interests (Warikoo, 1989). This indirect rule system reduced administrative costs and minimized resistance among local populations.

Judicial and revenue administration within the Gilgit Agency also reflected the frontier character of British colonial governance. Traditional tribal customs and local laws continued to operate alongside colonial regulations imposed by British officers. Local rulers and tribal elders played an important role in resolving disputes through customary institutions such as jirgas, while serious political or security matters were handled by the Political Agent (Sökefeld, 2005). Revenue collection remained limited because the British viewed Gilgit primarily as a strategic frontier rather than an economically profitable region. Instead of developing a complex bureaucratic system, the British focused on maintaining political stability, securing frontier routes, and strengthening intelligence networks across the northern mountains (Hopkirk, 1990).

### **Military and Intelligence System**

The military and intelligence system of the Gilgit Agency formed the foundation of British frontier policy in the northern regions of India. Because of Gilgit's strategic location near the borders of Russia, China, and Afghanistan, the British considered military preparedness essential for protecting imperial interests (Hopkirk, 1990). The difficult mountainous terrain and limited communication routes increased British fears of foreign infiltration and political unrest. Consequently, the British developed a strong intelligence network and established local military institutions to secure the frontier. Political Agents regularly sent intelligence reports to the Government of India regarding troop movements, trade activities, and political developments in Central Asia (Yapp, 1980).

One of the most important military developments in the Gilgit Agency was the formation of the **Gilgit Scouts** in 1913. The force was composed mainly of local recruits from Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, Punial, and nearby regions under the command of British officers (Barthorp, 2002). The Scouts were responsible for patrolling mountain passes, maintaining frontier security, and assisting British authorities during military operations. Their knowledge of local geography and tribal conditions made them highly effective in surveillance and frontier defense. The British relied heavily on the Scouts because they provided a cheaper and more practical alternative to deploying large numbers of regular British troops in remote mountain regions (Warikoo, 1989).

The intelligence network established by the British extended beyond Gilgit into neighboring regions such as Xinjiang, Chitral, Wakhan, and Afghanistan. British officers collected information through travelers, traders, local informants, and frontier agents in order to monitor Russian activities and regional political changes (Durand, 1899). Communication systems such as telegraph lines and military roads further strengthened British intelligence operations and administrative coordination. During the First and Second World Wars, frontier surveillance became even more important because the British feared possible foreign influence in the northern mountains (Dani, 1989). The military and intelligence system of the Gilgit Agency therefore became a crucial component of Britain's broader imperial defense strategy in South and Central Asia.

### **Relations with Local States and Tribal Areas**

The British colonial administration in the Gilgit Agency depended heavily on maintaining stable relations with local rulers and tribal communities. The region



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consisted of several semi-autonomous states and tribal territories such as Hunza, Nagar, Puniyal, Yasin, Darel, Tangir, and Chilas, each governed by local rulers with strong tribal influence (Dani, 1989). Instead of direct annexation, the British adopted a policy of indirect rule in which local rulers retained internal authority while accepting British political supervision. Through treaties, subsidies, and diplomatic relations, the British attempted to secure loyalty and maintain peace along the northern frontier (Durand, 1899).

Among the frontier states, Hunza and Nagar held particular strategic importance because of their proximity to Chinese Turkestan and the mountain passes leading into Central Asia. During the late nineteenth century, the rulers of Hunza and Nagar maintained relations with both Russia and China, which created serious concerns for British officials (Hopkirk, 1990). In response, the British launched the Hunza-Nagar military campaign in 1891 to establish greater control over the region. After the campaign, the local rulers accepted British authority and agreed to cooperate with the Political Agent in Gilgit (Warikoo, 1989). The British then provided annual subsidies and political protection to these rulers in exchange for military support and frontier stability.

Relations with tribal regions such as Darel, Tangir, and Chilas were more complicated because these areas were known for resistance to external authority. The tribes frequently opposed Dogra and British influence and maintained strong traditions of independence (Sökefeld, 2005). British officials therefore relied on negotiation, tribal diplomacy, and selective military action to manage these frontier areas. Local jirgas and tribal elders were often involved in dispute resolution and political negotiations. By balancing military pressure with political cooperation, the British succeeded in creating a relatively stable frontier system that protected imperial interests without requiring complete administrative integration of the tribal territories (Lamb, 1991).

### **Infrastructure and Communication Development**

The development of infrastructure and communication systems was an important aspect of British colonial administration in the Gilgit Agency. The British considered roads, bridges, telegraph lines, and military posts essential for maintaining control over the remote mountainous frontier. Due to the difficult terrain and harsh climate, communication between Gilgit and the rest of British India remained extremely challenging during the nineteenth century (Dani, 1989). British officials therefore focused on constructing strategic routes that could facilitate troop movement, intelligence operations, and administrative coordination. These infrastructure projects were motivated primarily by military and strategic concerns rather than economic development (Hopkirk, 1990).

One of the major achievements of British administration was the improvement of the Gilgit-Kashmir route through Bunji and the construction of military roads connecting frontier areas. These roads enabled faster communication between Gilgit and Srinagar and strengthened British military mobility along the northern frontier (Durand, 1899). In addition, the British established telegraph and wireless communication systems that linked Gilgit with other important frontier stations. Telegraph lines allowed Political Agents to communicate directly with British authorities in Kashmir and India regarding military and political developments (Warikoo, 1989). This communication network became especially important during periods of regional tension and global conflict, including the First and Second World Wars.

The British also constructed forts, rest houses, supply stations, and administrative buildings across the Gilgit Agency. Military posts were established near important



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mountain passes and trade routes to strengthen frontier surveillance and security (Barthorp, 2002). Trade and caravan routes connecting Gilgit with Kashgar, Chitral, and Central Asia were monitored closely because they served both commercial and intelligence purposes. Although some infrastructure projects improved local transportation and communication, their primary objective remained the protection of British imperial interests in the region (Sökefeld, 2005). Consequently, infrastructure development under British rule transformed Gilgit into a strategically connected frontier outpost of the British Empire.

### **Social and Economic Changes Under British Rule**

British colonial administration in the Gilgit Agency introduced limited but significant social and economic changes in the region. Unlike other parts of British India, Gilgit was not viewed as an economically profitable territory; therefore, the British focused mainly on strategic and military objectives rather than large-scale economic development (Hopkirk, 1990). However, administrative reforms, improved communication systems, and frontier security gradually influenced local society and economic activities. The introduction of a more organized administrative structure reduced tribal conflicts and increased political stability in several frontier areas (Dani, 1989).

Trade and commercial activities also expanded during the British period due to improved roads and safer caravan routes. Gilgit occupied an important position on traditional trade routes linking Kashmir, Chitral, Xinjiang, and Central Asia (Kreutzmann, 2015). The British monitored these trade routes carefully because they were strategically important for intelligence gathering and regional influence. Local traders benefited from improved transportation and communication systems, although trade remained limited because of geographical isolation and harsh climatic conditions. Revenue collection and taxation systems were also reorganized under British supervision, but economic policies remained secondary to military and political concerns (Warikoo, 1989).

Social changes under British rule were gradual and uneven. Missionary organizations introduced limited educational and healthcare facilities in some parts of the Gilgit Agency, including dispensaries and small schools (Sökefeld, 2005). The recruitment of local people into institutions such as the Gilgit Scouts created new employment opportunities and strengthened interaction between local communities and colonial administration. At the same time, British policies reinforced the authority of local rulers and tribal elites through subsidies and political alliances, which preserved traditional social hierarchies (Lamb, 1991). Consequently, British rule brought selective modernization to Gilgit while maintaining the region's broader political and economic dependence on colonial frontier administration.

### **The 1935 Lease Agreement and Direct British Control**

The 1935 lease agreement marked a major turning point in the history of British colonial administration in the Gilgit Agency. Under this agreement, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir leased the Gilgit region to the British Government for a period of sixty years (Lamb, 1991). The British considered direct control necessary because of increasing geopolitical tensions in Central Asia and fears regarding Soviet expansion toward the northern frontier of India. British officials believed that indirect administration through the Dogra government was no longer sufficient for protecting imperial strategic interests in the region (Hopkirk, 1990). Consequently, the lease agreement allowed the British to assume full administrative and military authority over Gilgit while the Maharaja retained only nominal sovereignty.



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Following the agreement, the British reorganized the administration of the Gilgit Agency under direct colonial supervision. The Political Agent became the chief administrative authority responsible for civil administration, frontier security, intelligence operations, and relations with local rulers (Dani, 1989). The British strengthened military infrastructure, expanded communication networks, and increased the activities of the Gilgit Scouts to secure the frontier against possible foreign threats. The region became even more important during the Second World War because British authorities feared that international political instability could affect the security of northern India (Warikoo, 1989). Direct control therefore enabled the British to coordinate military and intelligence operations more efficiently across the frontier.

The lease agreement also influenced local political and administrative structures within Gilgit. British officers exercised greater authority over local rulers and tribal areas, reducing the remaining influence of the Dogra administration (Sökefeld, 2005). Although traditional systems of local governance continued to exist, important political decisions increasingly depended on British approval. The British administration focused primarily on maintaining frontier stability and protecting strategic interests rather than promoting political representation or economic modernization (Durand, 1899). As a result, the 1935 lease agreement consolidated British power in Gilgit and transformed the region into a directly controlled frontier outpost until the end of colonial rule in 1947.

### **Gilgit During the Final Years of British Rule (1935–1947)**

During the final years of British rule, the Gilgit Agency became one of the most strategically sensitive frontier regions of the British Indian Empire. After the 1935 lease agreement, British authorities exercised direct control over administration, defense, and intelligence operations in Gilgit (Lamb, 1991). The growing international tensions before and during the Second World War increased the strategic value of the region because the British feared possible Soviet influence in Central Asia and the northern frontiers of India (Hopkirk, 1990). Consequently, the colonial administration expanded military surveillance, strengthened frontier security, and improved communication systems throughout the Agency. British Political Agents played a central role in coordinating military and political affairs while maintaining relations with local rulers and tribal leaders (Dani, 1989).

The Second World War further increased the importance of Gilgit within British imperial defense policy. The British feared that global political instability could encourage foreign infiltration or anti-colonial unrest along the northern frontier (Warikoo, 1989). The Gilgit Scouts were strengthened and assigned greater responsibility for patrolling mountain passes, monitoring border routes, and maintaining internal stability. Intelligence operations also intensified during this period, with British officers closely observing developments in Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Soviet Central Asia (Durand, 1899). The region's roads, telegraph systems, and military posts were expanded to improve communication between Gilgit and British India. Despite these strategic developments, the British administration continued to invest very little in broader economic or political reforms within the region.

The political situation changed rapidly after the announcement of British withdrawal from India in 1947. As British colonial rule came to an end, the Gilgit Agency was formally returned to the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir on 1 August 1947 (Lamb, 1991). However, local dissatisfaction with Dogra rule remained strong among the population and within the Gilgit Scouts. Under the leadership of Major William Brown, the Scouts launched the Gilgit Rebellion on 1 November 1947 and overthrew the Dogra



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administration (Brown, 1998). Shortly afterward, Gilgit declared accession to Pakistan. These events marked the end of British colonial administration in the region, but many administrative and military structures established during British rule continued to influence governance in Gilgit after 1947 (Sökefeld, 2005).

### Conclusion

British colonial administration in the Gilgit Agency between 1886 and 1947 played a major role in transforming the region into an important frontier zone of the British Indian Empire. The British involvement in Gilgit was mainly motivated by strategic and geopolitical concerns linked to the protection of India's northern borders during the period of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Through the establishment of the Gilgit Agency, the British created a system of political control that combined military strength, intelligence operations, and indirect rule through local rulers and tribal elites.

The administrative structure introduced by the British strengthened frontier security and expanded communication networks across the mountainous region. Institutions such as the Gilgit Scouts, frontier roads, telegraph systems, and military posts became important tools for maintaining political stability and monitoring regional developments. The British successfully used diplomacy, subsidies, and local alliances to control frontier territories such as Hunza, Nagar, Punial, and Chilas without complete annexation. This system allowed the colonial administration to secure strategic interests while minimizing direct administrative costs and local resistance.

Despite some improvements in communication and trade, economic and social development remained limited because the British viewed Gilgit mainly as a strategic military frontier rather than an economically productive territory. Colonial policies focused more on defense and intelligence than on political representation or public welfare. However, the administrative and military institutions established during this period continued to influence governance structures in the region after the end of British rule in 1947.

The final years of British administration and the events surrounding the Gilgit Rebellion demonstrated the lasting political impact of colonial frontier policies. The transition from Dogra authority to British control and eventually to Pakistan reflected the strategic importance of Gilgit within regional politics. Overall, British colonial rule left a deep political, military, and administrative legacy that shaped the historical development of Gilgit and continued to influence the region in the post-colonial era.

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