

## Crossing the Sutlej River: An examination of early British rule in the West Himalayas

Arik Moran

The challenges entailed in establishing political authority over the mountainous terrain of the Himalayas became particularly pronounced in the modern era, as large-scale centralized states (e.g. British India, Gorkha Nepal) extended their rule over remote parts of the mountain chain. In this novel political setting, the encounters of the representatives of greater powers with their counterparts from subordinate polities were often fraught with clashes, misunderstandings and manipulations that stemmed from the discrepancy between local notions of governance and those imposed from above. This was especially apparent along British India's imperial frontier, where strategic considerations dictated a cautious approach towards subject states so as to minimize friction with neighbouring superpowers across the border. As a result, the headmen inhabiting frontier zones enjoyed a conspicuous advantage in dealing with their superiors insofar as 'deliberate misrepresentations and manipulation[s]' of local practices allowed them to further their aims while retaining the benefits of protection by a robust imperial structure (O'Hanlon 1988: 217). This paper offers a detailed illustration of the complications provoked by these conditions by examining the embroilment of a British East India Company official in a feud between the West Himalayan kingdoms of Bashahr and Kullu (in today's Himachal Pradesh, India) during the first half of the nineteenth century.

After ousting the Gorkha armies from the hills in 1815, Company authorities pursued a policy of minimal interference in the internal affairs of the mountain (*pahār*) kingdoms between the Yamuna and Sutlej Rivers, whose rulers were granted an autonomous status under the supervision of a political agent. In his capacity as the supreme representative of British authority, the agent played a central role in managing relations between the states under his jurisdiction, as evinced in the correspondence concerning a dispute between Bashahr and Kullu over a certain Peyaru Ram that are

---

I wish to thank the reviewers of the EBHR for their helpful comments and suggestions on this paper.

presented below.<sup>1</sup> Like most Pahari polities, the two kingdoms shared a long interconnected history that predated the establishment of the Sutlej River as the boundary between the Sikh and British empires, which lay to the north and south of the waterway respectively. The immediate outcome of this shift in geopolitics was to render Kullu subject to Lahore and make Bashahr a dependency of Calcutta. However, the separation between these divergent spheres of influence was far from hermetic: for the frontiersmen still entrenched in anterior political practices, this setting afforded altogether new opportunities to pursue their goals through a careful exploitation of the different notions of sovereignty and governance that prevailed on either side of the Sutlej.

Confronted with the multi-layered politics of local rulers on the one hand and the strategic exigencies of their superiors on the other, British administrators on the fringes of empire found their role exceedingly difficult. As seemingly straightforward cases, such as that of Peyaru Ram, came to involve myriad factors pertaining to local, regional and sub-continental concerns, the imperial representatives' capacity to adjudicate and effectively implement policies was significantly hampered and ultimately made a mockery of their claims to power. In order to understand how such intricate dynamics along a remote mountain border could evolve into a conundrum of mammoth proportions, it is necessary to look to the shadowy figures that crossed the turbulent current of the Sutlej River some two centuries ago.

### **A landholder between two kingdoms**

Shortly prior to the rainy season of 1835, Peyaru and Munth Ram, two brothers from the southern dependency of Seraj in the kingdom of Kullu, crossed the Sutlej River to settle in Nerth, a village situated in the mountain kingdom of Bashahr (see map). Having quit their homeland with minimal belongings, the brothers soon ran out of grain and consequently proceeded some ten kilometres down the river to replenish their supplies in the nearby market town of Shangri. Although situated on the southern bank of the Sutlej and thus within British territory, Shangri and its surrounding tracts

---

1 The sources for this affair are found in the archival records of the East India Company's Board of Control, which are preserved in the Oriental and Indian Office Collections at the British Library, London. For ease of reference, these are labelled 'IOR\_A' (for IOR F/4/1795/73789) and 'IOR\_B' (for IOR F/4/1829/75544).



Sketch map of key places mentioned in the Peyaru affair. Not to scale.

comprised part of Kullu, then an independent state subject to the Empire of Lahore.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after their arrival, the visitors were recognized by the villagers, who proceeded to seize Peyaru on the orders of Kapuru Singh, the wazir of Kullu. Peyaru was then carried across the river and incarcerated in

2 The small tract was conquered during the reign of Man Singh (r. 1688-1719) and remained part of Kullu under British sanction after the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-16 (Hutchison & Vogel 1999: 464).

Dheol Fort, while his brother was spared and returned to Nerth.

Two years later, word reached Nerth that the captive had been mutilated. Munth Ram swiftly arrived at his new overlord's court (*kacaharī*) in Rampur to lodge a complaint against Kullu on his brother's behalf. Wazir Mansukh Das of Bashahr subsequently submitted a formal complaint to the British authorities through his representative (*vakīl*) at the seat of British administration in Subathu, adjacent to the then developing township of Shimla. His claim was straightforward: Kapuru was wazir of Kullu and thus had 'no authority to tyrannize or oppress my master's subjects', all the more since 'such things are not permitted under the rule of the British' (IOR\_A: Amul Ram to Tapp, 11 August 1837, fo. 14-5).<sup>3</sup> The political agent, Colonel H. Tapp, began his enquiry by dispatching Kullu's resident vakil to procure an explanatory statement from his master. Whatever hopes he may have harboured for a quick resolution of the crisis dissipated with the receipt of Raja Ajit Singh's (b. 1810, r. 1816-41) response, which revealed important facts concerning the background to Peyaru's mutilation.

What answer can be given? Had the robber belonged to the district of Bussahir it would have been of no consequence... but the thief being my subject and having committed a robbery, I cut his leg and nose off. It is a custom in the country whenever a thief is apprehended he is killed without doubt... Whenever I caught a thief in my own territory and punished him, if I had taken his life there was nothing to dread. If I do not punish, how am I to retain the country in my possession? (IOR\_A: Ajit Singh to Tapp, received 25 September 1837, fo. 17-8).

As far as the Kullu raja was concerned, he was simply exercising his authority over a villainous subject who happened to reside in Bashahr. Ajit Singh was thus clearly in the right in punishing the culprit as befitting an independent ruler. The raja then shifted the debate to the crucial point of the matter: the question of Peyaru's legal status at the time of his arrest. This was, after all, 'his subject', and the political agent was cordially advised to investigate the matter so as to 'ascertain *when* the brother of the thief

---

<sup>3</sup> British officials claimed to have 'entirely abolished' the practice of mutilation in the preceding decade (cf. Kennedy to Murray, 20 November 1824, *Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency*: 311).

complained to the Rajah of Bussahir' (ibid., fo. 17, emphasis added). Caught between their former Kullu master and Bashahr, Peyaru and Munth Ram would continue to tax Tapp's energies as their case unfolded in a series of protracted exchanges between the agent and the kingdoms' representatives in the years that followed.

Two months later, Raja Mahindra Singh (b. ~1810, r. 1811-50) of Bashahr responded to Kullu's allegations by arguing that the two brothers were actually his own subjects, a fact that could be corroborated by the testimonies of neighbouring rulers.<sup>4</sup> The raja further explained that Munth Ram had since been persuaded by the Kullu wazir to return to the capital of Sultanpur so as to plead his case before Ajit Singh while his family remained in Nerth, where 'they have also sown a crop'. For the raja of Bashahr, this proved beyond doubt that the brothers were indeed his subjects and that 'the statement made by the Raja of Kooloo that Munth Ram is residing in Kooloo with his family is wholly untrue, because Munth Ram's family is living at the place Nerth ... [whereas Munth] Ram only is in Kooloo' (IOR\_A: Mahindra Singh to Tapp, received 20 November 1837, fo. 19-20).

While Tapp was mulling over Bashahr's representation of the affair, the Kullu wakil at Subathu furnished the officer with further clarifications concerning the dark history of the Ram brothers:

Peyaroo and Munth, Zemindars of Trans Sutlej district Kooloo, [which] is my master's jurisdiction, have been living for a year and a half in the village of Nerth in the Bussaher Territory, and used to commit robberies within my master's jurisdiction. Having committed several robberies, at [the] last and the third time Koopooroo Wuzeer apprehended Peyaroo in the act. The thief was punished agreeably to the customs of the country, his nose and leg were amputated. Both those brothers some time ago waited on my master, the Rajah of Kooloo, and represented that they were worthy of [as] much punishment as their crimes deserved, but that their homes and property might be untouched. The Raja, my master, agreeably to their solicitations, restored to them their houses, goats, sheep etc., and set them up. With respect to the wife and

---

4 These were the ranas of 'Kotguru' (*Kotgarh*) and Kumharsain, who shared a border with Shangri. Their status as tributaries of Bashahr prior to the establishment of British rule in 1815 most likely influenced their testimonies in the latter's favour (*Gazetteer of the Simla Hill States 1910: Bashahr 1995: 8*).

son and daughter of Peyaroo, who [are] living in the village of Nerth. Moonsookh Doss, Wuzeer of Bussaher, enticed these three individuals and took them into the Bussaher district and prevents their return. I have consequently preferred this petition in expectation that the three individuals: the woman, boy, and girl, subjects of my master's, may be restored from the Bussaher district where they have been allured by Moonsookh Doss Wuzeer. I have stated what was just (IOR\_A: Boodhoo vakil to Tapp, 19 November 1837, fo. 20-1).

The counter-allegations presented in the statement from Kullu completely overturned the Bashahri argument. The perpetrators, it explained, were prominent landholders (*zamīndārs*) in Kullu, who were justly punished for attempting to profit at their ruler's expense. Having admitted their guilt, they had since been pardoned and their confiscated property restored. Now, however, they became separated from their families, who were persuaded to stay in Bashahr through the wily machinations of Mansukh Das. Seeking to make sense of these contradictory statements, Tapp deemed it high time that the brothers appeared in court for a comprehensive enquiry into their case and an order (*parvānā*) to that effect was soon dispatched to Kullu, the response to which would invoke frictions far beyond the limited confines of the quarrelling mountain kingdoms.

### **The limitations of imperial rule**

Later that winter Tapp received a letter from the Kullu wazir in reply to his summons with a detailed response to Bashahr's allegations. Kapuru declared that the Ram brothers would not be coming to Subathu and proceeded to teach Tapp the limits of British rule beyond the Sutlej:

What necessity can exist that your slave should send a case of Kooloo to Simla? Order the individual who complained and he will produce Muthoo [Ram] to you. The Rajah of Bussaher forcibly and cruelly seized a woman, wife of Peyaroo, and a child who were going on the other side of the river for some business, conveyed them to Rampoor and placed a guard over them. They now threaten them and drive them to complain against ... Kooloo (IOR\_A: Kupuru Singh to Tapp, received 8 December 1837, fo. 22-3).

In essence, the wazir simply restated his master's conviction that the affairs of Kullu lay beyond the jurisdiction of the British government. Well aware that Munth Ram is in Kullu, Kapuru mockingly invites the raja of Bashahr to procure the presence of his supposed subject. Yet he goes further, arguing that the allegations brought against his raja are moot to begin with since they rest on coercive measures adopted by Mahindra Singh, a ruler under British protection. Indeed, 'if any person forcibly seized another and compelled them to write... can that be a [legitimate] complaint, which a person is compelled to make by another through fear?' (ibid., fo. 23).

Having established the fallacy of Bashahr's complaints, Kapuru went on to expound upon Kullu's perception of the affair. According to the wazir, after his family was forcibly taken to Bashahr, Peyaru sent his men to inquire about their fate. The Kullu authorities similarly sent an envoy to learn what crime they were accused of committing and demand their release. The raja of Bashahr replied that 'these individuals are indebted to him in a sum of money' and were therefore imprisoned. Kapuru explained that the 'sum of money'—60 rupees, to be precise—was actually a debt owed by merchants (*mahājans*) based on the Bashahri side of the Sutlej. As Peyaru had crossed the river and 'took the money from the Mahajans in the broad light of day', his actions constituted a collection of debt on the part of the Kullu raja and he had therefore 'committed no theft and was not guilty of highway robbery' (ibid.). Indeed, as a servant of the Kullu Court (*darbār*), Peyaru was merely upholding his government's commitment to its own traders, since 'the Mahajans of this [i.e. Kullu] side [of the Sutlej River] have thousands of rupees to recover from those on the other, and what have those to receive from us?' (ibid., fo. 23-4). In conclusion, the wazir restated his master's grievances against the evasive tactics of Bashahr: Mahindra Singh's complaints against Kullu were false since they had been obtained through the forceful detention of Peyaru's family beyond the Sutlej, an act compounded by the Bashahr raja's sanction of his traders' unlawful withholding of debts owed to their counterparts in Kullu.

Once again, the wazir cleverly changed the arguments' focus. Instead of Peyaru's kidnapping and mutilation—he was, after all, pardoned by Ajit Singh and back in state service—it is the Bashahr regime's cynical abduction of his family that is at stake. As far as the Sultanpur Court was concerned, the complaints were merely a ploy intended to mask the Bashahri regime's true aim of profiting from British protection by advancing fictitious

claims against Kullu that would obscure the illegal activity of its traders. Kapuru's fiery rhetoric, however, failed to convince the political agent, who forwarded a copy of the letter to his superiors in Delhi the very same day along with an admonishing reply to the wazir:

If you are again [to] submit any disrespectful petition you will be punished. Your Vakeel has been for this reason dismissed from this Kutchery and until you apologize for the insolent tone of your Petition, no individual sent by you will be permitted to be in attendance in the Kutchery (IOR\_A: Tapp to Kupuru Singh, 8 December 1837, fo. 25).

Kapuru's assertion of independence was thus repaid with the banishment of his kingdom's representative from the British outpost. This was no mean punishment, for the proximity of Subathu to Bashahr and Kullu rendered it far more significant a political centre than its Sikh counterpart in Kangra, to which Kullu was officially subordinate. The vakil's dismissal deprived Kullu of direct contact with the British, in whose territory they had interests (e.g. Shangri, traders), thereby substantially weakening its position in relation to its political neighbours and rivals, while strengthening the already favourable status of Bashahr.<sup>5</sup>

Ten days later, Bashahr's vakil in Subathu presented Tapp with his master's version of the events. After restating the facts of Kapuru's narrative while tactfully omitting the issue of cross-river debts, the petition reverted to the root of the matter: namely, that 'without fault or crime, he [i.e., Kapuru] has cut the nose and leg of Peyaroo.' Playing upon Tapp's displeasure with Kullu, the vakil highlighted the 'ferocities' of justice administration north of the Sutlej so as to undermine Kullu's initial arguments regarding the inextricability of the right to punish from the right to rule.<sup>6</sup> As for the

---

5 Bashahr enjoyed a privileged status in British circles during the first half of the nineteenth century due to its trade contacts with West Tibet via its eastern territory of Kinnaur. The court at Rampur thus played a central part in negotiating a relaxation of restrictions on pashm wool trade on behalf of Calcutta, a move that was intended to undermine Lahore's lucrative shawl-weaving industry, which relied on the product. Such attempts, however, were rarely successful (Datta 1973: 188-91). The favourable bias of Company officials towards Bashahr is further evinced in the preceding political agent's description of wazir Mansukh Das as 'the greatest of mountain ministers' (Jacquemont 1933: 233-4).

6 The vakil further noted that 'even had he [i.e., Peyaru] been a thief, was it right to have put such an injury on his body? Hundreds of thieves are apprehended under the rule of



alleged incarceration of Peyaru's family, the vakil suggested Tapp

kindly investigate this case and ascertain Koopooroo Wuzeer's truth a falsehood; sometimes he writes one thing and at others another. What does it concern Munsookh Doss whether they go [to Kullu] or not? However, these three individuals do not go through dread of their lives. They are aware that their father's fate awaits them (IOR\_A: Anut Ram to Tapp, 18 December 1837, fo. 27).

Lost in a thicket of layered and conflicting accusations, Tapp soon despaired of concluding the case. As the Company's ultimate authority in the hills between the Yamuna and Sutlej Rivers, the agent's agenda was already crammed with urgent tasks that necessitated a great deal of travel and attention. A shortage of staff and the feverish preparations for the Governor-General's impending visit to Shimla added to the habitual strains of his post, while the Dogra invasion of Ladakh under the sanction of Lahore and its advance towards West Tibet (1834-42) further delayed treatment of the Peyaru affair. In his capacity as commander of Gorkha Battalion (the Company's regional executive force charged with maintaining security), Tapp became deeply invested in monitoring developments on the Dogra front, entering into communications with the exiled rulers of Ladakh upon their arrival in Spiti.<sup>7</sup> The officer's mounting duties quickly superseded the local dispute between Bashahr and Kullu, which was deferred for the time being.

### Settling the Peyaru affair

It took Tapp more than six months to furnish a report on the Peyaru affair, and when it was finally submitted the political agent professed his inability to arrive at a clear conclusion.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, 'judging from the

---

the Hon'ble Company [and yet] they are kept in Jail as prisoners and receive a ration from the Hon'ble Company' (IOR\_A: Anut Ram to Tapp, 18 December 1837, fo. 26).

7 The Dogra menace in West Tibet strengthened the strategic partnership between Bashahr and the Company, especially after Ranjit Singh threatened to have the Dogra soldiers annex portions of the kingdom in the mountainous interior that were situated north of the Sutlej bordering West Tibet (Datta 1973: 157-8). For more on the Dogra conquest and its regional implications see Datta (1973).

8 An initial report to the Resident at Delhi was sent in August 1837, followed by a full report with enclosed correspondences in May 1838.

relative conduct of characters of the two Rajahs,' he was inclined to accept Bashahr's account as true and placed 'no confidence' in that of Kullu. In support of his assessment, Tapp enclosed copies of Kapuru's letters in Persian, as 'the English translation scarcely gives the full face of some of the disrespectful expressions used throughout by him' (IOR\_A: Tapp to Metcalfe, 4 May 1838, p. 12). The texts were perceived as a blatant challenge to Company authority, and Tapp's superiors in Delhi and Calcutta agreed that Kapuru's 'highly unbecoming language' needed to be addressed, with the Resident at Delhi going as far as to recommend that Raja Ajit Singh himself be summoned to Subathu to apologize on behalf of his wazir (IOR\_A: Metcalfe to Macnaughten, 12 May 1838, fo. 10). For the authorities in Calcutta, however, the most disturbing aspect of the affair was in the threat it posed for peace along the empire's border with Lahore, which had been carefully guarded since its establishment along the Sutlej River in 1809.<sup>9</sup> It was this strategic consideration that prompted them to admonish Tapp for the tardy handling of the affair when he finally submitted his report, his superiors demanding he resolve the dispute as soon as possible.<sup>10</sup>

The Governor-General's alarm over Tapp's failure to resolve the case led to an increase in political activity by Company officials throughout the region. The political agent in Ludhiana, who was charged with communications with Lahore on matters beyond the Sutlej, contacted the Sikh authorities to request their intervention with their subsidiary state of Kullu.<sup>11</sup> The effect was instantaneous, as soon afterwards both Kapuru Singh and Munth Ram personally arrived in Subathu. Thus at the close of 1838, some three years after Peyaru and his brother had first traversed the Sutlej to settle in Nerth, the representatives of all the concerned parties

---

9 As recently noted by Ben Hopkins (2008: 34-60), contemporary sources indicate that the British were more concerned about a Sikh threat than about any possible invasion by France or Russia, which provided the original impetus for the Company's alliance with Lahore.

10 The agent's listing of the numerous chores of his post as an excuse for his delayed reporting was deemed 'far from satisfactory' by his superiors (IOR\_A: Torens to Tapp, 19 May 1838, fo. 35). Three months later, the political agent was still attracting recriminations from officers in Calcutta (IOR\_B: Narrative of the Political Department for 1839, fo. 1).

11 The Agency at Ludhiana, situated in the plains along the Sutlej River, was the primary node for contact between Calcutta and Lahore. During the 1830s the institution gained immense prestige, with Company authorities reporting directly to the Governor-General's office (instead of Delhi) and playing a decisive role in informing British policy towards the Sikhs (Yapp 1980: 190-1).

finally convened at the British outpost, where Tapp sought to conclude the case.<sup>12</sup>

Although the agent ‘examined the witnesses on both sides on oath, permitting each party to examine and cross-examine as he pleased,’ he still found it impossible to reach a verdict, as statements were changed and witnesses backtracked (IOR\_B: Tapp to Maddock, 17 April 1839, fo. 9). Munth Ram, in particular, while openly admitting the criminal status he shared with his brother in Kullu, now denied ever lodging a complaint with the Rampur Durbar in glaring contradiction of written evidence. Under these circumstances, Tapp was forced to rely exclusively on the kingdoms’ official representations as conveyed by the wazirs’ statements, from which three points were established with complete certainty: (1) the Ram brothers were engaged in criminal activity in Kullu prior to their settlement in Bashahr. According to Kapuru, this pattern persisted after they had moved to Nerth, when Peyaru ‘was in the habit of crossing over into Kooloo and carrying off the property of the inhabitants’ (IOR\_B: Tapp to Maddock, 17 April 1839, p. 10).<sup>13</sup> The wazir could not, however, produce the letters supposedly exchanged with the Bashahr authorities regarding the persistence of Peyaru’s ‘habit’. Representing Bashahr, Mansukh Das denied the occurrence of additional raids, save for one instance when Peyaru ‘brought over some bullocks in liquidation of a debt, which the Rajah of Bussahir, on representation from the Wuzeer of Kooloo, instantly compelled Peyaroo to give up’ (IOR\_B: Tapp to Maddock, 17 April 1839, fo. 11). (2) Peyaru was forcibly seized south of the Sutlej in Kullu’s tract of Shangri and transported north of the river, where he was imprisoned and mutilated.<sup>14</sup> (3) Peyaru had resided in Nerth ‘for about two years’ (ibid., fo.

---

12 It is impossible to pinpoint the precise date of the investigation from the records, save that by mid-April 1839 ‘upwards of four months’ had passed since the hearings (IOR\_B: Tapp to Maddock, 17 April 1839, fo. 11).

13 This was corroborated by Munth Ram’s initial statement at the Bashahr court, which detailed the reasons for the brothers’ quitting Kullu. These were ‘first, because Garoo Vuzeer [of the Ram brothers’ home tract of Seraj and thus subordinate to Kapuru] made us pay without cause a demand of 60 Rs. Secondly, because Koopooroo Wuzeer deprived us of all that was within our house—viz. 500 tons of grain, 72 goats and sheep and 32 bullocks and cows. Having no remedy we came and lived in your district [of Bashahr]’ (IOR\_A: Statement made in the Kutchery of Rampoor by Munth Ram, Kanath [Kanet] Zamindar of village Nerth, 3 August 1837, fo. 15-6).

14 Munth Ram alleged his brother ‘was imprisoned in the fort of Bhord for stealing levies belonging to the Rajah [of Kullu] and that he escaped from there by making a hole in

10). The significance of this point for determining the legality of the parties' actions escaped the agent (more on this below), who noted it as little more than a trivial piece of information that did little to advance the enquiry.

While Tapp's investigation helped clarify the course of events and the nature of power relations between the parties, it remained utterly marginal to the Company's imperial concerns. In his subsequent handling of the case, the agent exhibited a sobering realignment with Calcutta's policy, which was decidedly focused on maintaining the peace along its frontier rather than eliciting apologies for its representative's hurt pride. In an apparent reversal of his earlier stance, Tapp now plainly conceded that there were no grounds for interfering in an independent sovereign's rule and concentrated on the fragmented holdings of the Kullu raja and his wazir within British territory south of the Sutlej instead. Unable to act directly against Kullu, Tapp was consumed by a fundamental question regarding British policy: what were the legitimate means of coercion available to Company officers when dealing with an independent ruler who is subservient to a foreign (Sikh) power, but who also owns lands in areas under British protection (Shangri)?

This dilemma was, in fact, a reflection of the officer's own unease with his increasing lack of control over the chiefs under his jurisdiction. Kapuru Singh is a case in point. As the manager of Kullu state, the wazir was an independent agent. However, Kapuru also held lands in the British tract of Kotgarh south of the Sutlej (much like his master in respect of Shangri), which rendered him directly subservient to Tapp. While previous political agents 'were in the habit of requiring the most uncompromising obedience from all parties,' Tapp intimated that the assiduous pursuit of a reform in land ownership regulations by the serving Governor-General, William Bentinck, placed significant restraints on his scope for action (IOR\_A: Tapp to Metcalfe, 4 May 1838, fo. 13).<sup>15</sup> Although they barely impacted net revenue collections, the reforms did much to divorce the all-binding sentiments of tenants towards the Company that had hitherto been exploited by the agent's predecessors. Thus, for Tapp, the 'sanctification' of Kapuru's landholding rights south of the Sutlej deprived him of the

---

the wall.' His denial of earlier statements, however, was found to 'seriously affect' his credibility as a witness (*ibid.*, fo. 11-2).

15 For the reforms in land revenue and their effects on Indian administration see Stokes (1969: 81-139).

means to exert pressure on the wazir, giving rise to the latter's ubiquitous insolence.<sup>16</sup> Baffled by his inability to counter Kapuru's fierce assertions of independence, the agent implored his superiors to provide some legal device through which the wazir might be pressured into compliance. By this stage, however, all attempts to contain the unruly wazir were sidelined by the overriding interests of empire.

Nearly eighteen months after Tapp's botched investigation in Subathu, British authorities decided to bring the case to the personal attention of the Kullu raja's Sikh overlord. The political agent in Ludhiana was instructed to 'take a suitable opportunity in his visit to Lahore to notice the unjustifiable conduct of Kooloo Authorities on the occasion, with a view to the adoption of measures to prevent any similar infringement of the boundary jurisdiction' (IOR\_B: Proceedings for May-June 1839, fo. 1). Two months later Ranjit Singh issued 'positive orders on the subject,' which were personally communicated to Ajit Singh to the great relief of officials in Calcutta. The empire's Sikh border was once more secure.

### **Echoes of the Peyaru affair in the hills**

The quelling of imperial anxieties hardly affected the situation in Subathu, where the political agent was continually confronted with the defiance of Kullu's representatives. The kingdom's interests south of the Sutlej (e.g. Shangri, Kapuru's landholdings in Kotgarh) nonetheless dictated that some semblance of correct working relations with the Agency be maintained, which was to be achieved through carefully worded diplomacy so long as the case of Peyaru Ram remained unresolved. Thus, two years after the banishment of his vakil from Subathu, Kapuru was still sending letters to Tapp expressing his 'horror' at being dubbed 'insolent'. The agent, however, stood his ground and would not reply until the requested apology materialized.

In his letters, Kapuru conveys a consistent sense of dignity as befitting the principal functionary of an independent kingdom. He simply saw no need to apologize. It was, after all, Tapp's own employer, the British East Indian Company, which had introduced the political arrangements upon

---

16 Tapp's entitlement to 'uncompromising obedience' was similarly 'questioned with a careless regard of consequences' by other zamindars in the region (IOR\_A: Tapp to Metcalfe, 4 May 1838, fo. 13).

which he based his logic. Consider the following extract from Kapuru's letter to Tapp, in which he offers an explanation for his alleged insolence:

I certainly did represent that this side of the river was under the jurisdiction of his highness maharaja Runjeet Singh and all cases appertaining to this side were in the first instance settled on this side. That the other side of the River was within the Hon'ble Company's Jurisdiction and cases belonging to that side were arranged at that side, this has ever been the custom. You are also acquainted with this circumstance therefore I have not in my opinion been guilty of disrespect (IOR\_A: Kupuru Wazir to Tapp, 5 Poo samvat 1894 [~ early August 1837], fo. 28).

It was undoubtedly the dry factual statement of the limits of his own power that enraged Tapp. Faithful to this line of argument, Kapuru continued to aggravate the agent while remaining sensible to the limits of his legal rights:

You dismissed the Vaqueel from the Kutchery. I also was about to withdraw him. His stay at Simla unemployed incurred an expense on me equal to that of four individuals. I have had a few cases pending on which account I appointed a Vaqueel. You did not investigate them and what reason had I for a Vuqueel? I am not at all concerned at your dismissing him. I never had a Vuqueel before at Simla or Subathoo and whenever the Hon'ble Company had any business to transact, a Chuprassee [*caprāsī*, i.e. an official messenger] was sent to the Rajah, and where the Rajah had occasion to transmit any matter, a Vuqueel was sent by him to Subathoo or Simla. This shall be the system for the future. Continue to honour me with your orders and you will not find your slave wanting (ibid., fo. 28-9).

The wazir's letter goes a long way towards explaining Tapp's motives for dismissing the vakil. Deprived of the right to hamper Kullu landholdings under his jurisdiction, the agent (ab)used his political powers to suspend the kingdom's legal cases in Subathu as a form of punishment. This move too, however, failed to procure an apology from the indignant wazir. It would require the workings of greater forces to induce a change in Kapuru's

attitude towards the regional representative of British authority; such pressures made a timely appearance soon afterwards.

Three weeks later, Kapuru's letters changed their tone. The death of Ranjit Singh at Lahore plunged the Sikh empire into disarray and the leaders of its tributary states warily eyed the ensuing power struggles at its court. These developments were closely followed in Kullu, where fears of augmented tribute demands or worse stirred considerable unrest. The threat of a belligerent Sikh leadership prompted a reconsideration of Sultanpur's relations with the Company, and the subsequent communications on record reveal a dramatic change of position on the part of the wazir. A now humbled Kapuru continued to proclaim ignorance of the 'insolent language' he was accused of using, but nonetheless requested the agent, 'point it out to me, and I shall never again make use of it' (IOR\_A: Kupuru to Tapp, 24 Poo, Samvat 1894 [~ late August 1837], fo. 29-30). The fiery exclamations concerning the vakil's presence in Subathu were also toned down; although banished, the wazir intimated that should Tapp 'require him to be in attendance at Court, he will be present at all time' (ibid.).

Simultaneously, Kapuru took direct measures to resolve the root of the problem by enabling the remaining members of Peyaru's family to safely re-enter Kullu. He then proceeded to contact the raja of Bashahr by way of 'a confidential servant' (a certain 'Suntum Brahmun') who informed Mahindra Singh that 'it was not proper to bring our affairs before the Adawlat [i.e. the British Court], [and] that it would be better was [sic] amity to subsist between us' (IOR\_A: Mahindra Singh to Tapp, received 24 January 1839, fo. 31-3). Clearly, the Kullu authorities were bent on ameliorating relations with both the Subathu Agency and the neighbouring kingdom of Bashahr. While the archival records on the affair stop at this stage, we may safely assume that Mahindra Singh's forwarding of the secret messenger's letter to Tapp and the (possibly forced) return of Peyaru's family to Kullu did little to salvage the kingdom's status in Subathu. Colonel Tapp's persistent policy, which labelled Bashahr as a valuable ally and Kullu a problematic kingdom at best, was thus finally vindicated.

A few months later, Kapuru fell out of favour with Ajit Singh and proceeded to stage a popular revolt (*dūm*) in Seraj.<sup>17</sup> Having turned against

---

17 While local tradition (cf. Howell 1917) traces the roots of the conflict to a longstanding competition between 'Kapuni' (i.e., Kapuru) and another court official, it is probable that

his master, the wazir invited Sikh troops to invade Kullu; a miscalculation that resulted in the flight of both raja and former minister to seek refuge in British territory south of the Sutlej.<sup>18</sup> Tapp must have viewed these events with some satisfaction, the political turbulence contributing to his conviction that British rule was a precondition for peace in the troubled Himalayas. Faithfully reflecting the ideology permeating mid-nineteenth century British administration in India, the agent's approach reached its teleological conclusion less than a decade later with the conquest of Kullu in the wake of the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1846.

### Reflections on the Peyaru affair

Looking back at the Peyaru affair, several points concerning the political reality of the West Himalayas and its interplay with colonial rule seem to merit special attention. First, the root causes of the case are strictly local. Originating in a conflict over 60 Rupees between a small-scale landholder and his immediate superior ('Garoo Vuzeer' of Seraj), Peyaru Ram and his brother gradually earn the resentment of higher echelons in the Kullu government. By the time of their settlement in Nerth, the brothers had become notorious for subverting the raja's authority as renegade zamindars who steal from their erstwhile monarch.

Criminality, as we have seen, is a relative matter. Once Peyaru reverts to Ajit Singh's favour, his thieving receives the court's sanction and the villain is rebranded as a state agent.<sup>19</sup> The affair thus follows the typical course of power struggles in pre-colonial India and would probably never

---

the wazir's mishandling of the Peyaru affair further distanced him from his raja.

- 18 Once in Kullu, the Sikh guards placed over Ajit Singh constantly humiliated the raja—most conspicuously by holding him upside down by his moustache—inducing a change of heart on the part of the wazir, who orchestrated a successful rescue mission that culminated in the raja's release and resettlement in Shangri. Ajit Singh died soon afterwards and was succeeded by his one year-old son, Ranbir Singh, with Kapuru serving as wazir. Meanwhile, the Sikhs placed another member of the royal family on the throne in Kullu. Kapuru then set off to Lahore in order to plead Ranbir Singh's case before the Sikh court, but was arrested upon entering the neighbouring kingdom of Mandi, where he died shortly afterwards (Singh 1885: 97). For a review of Ajit Singh's reign consult Hutchison & Vogel (1999: 469-73).
- 19 The invasion of Spiti by two Kullu wazirs in 1818 to seize withheld tribute (in the form of cattle) recalls Peyaru's debt collections, and both can be seen as a form of Kullu governance in action. Note that neither of these cases involved bloodshed (Jacquemont 1933: 287).



have been brought to our attention were it not for its geopolitical setting. It is Peyaru's attempts to draw fortunes on the border between two mutually untrusting empires that inevitably attract the attention of higher levels of government. The adventurer-zamindar's astuteness, however, must not be underestimated: his choice of stealing from Kullu while residing in a village under British protection (through the medium of Bashahr) reflects an awareness of the advantages Company rule could afford him, should he be caught.

Second, the same considerations that may have prompted Peyaru to reside in a British protectorate account for Kapuru's powerful position in relation to Tapp. It is the East India Company's policy in the age of reform that prevents the political agent from exacting pressure on the wazir in his capacity as a landholder under Tapp's jurisdiction. Secured by favourable land revenue regulations, Kapuru's status as the wazir of an independent state allows him to freely mutilate offenders with his raja's consent without fearing for his property in British territory. Familiarity with colonial policy allows for further manipulations, as seen in the myriad allegations advanced against Bashahr, whose wazir is accused of procuring confessions through violence in ostensible infringement of Company norms.

Bashahr, too, exploits the colonial regime's sensibilities to advance its aims. Condemnation of the 'barbaric' practice of justice in Kullu serves not only to win favour in relation to the Peyaru case, but also to increase Tapp's confidence in Mahindra Singh's rule in general, so as to substantiate Bashahr's regional prestige. The ability of local rulers on both banks of the Sutlej to manipulate their standing with British authorities provides a vivid illustration of the Company officer's predicament on the Indian frontier. On display here are the contradictions inherent in British colonial rule, which called for a continual reconciliation of imperial ideologies with the discrepancies resulting from their practical implementation (Metcalf 1994). These are further complicated by the enmeshment of anterior configurations of power and political practice with the particular requirements of the Company's highly bureaucratized mode of governance. It is in the space created between the two that local rulers manipulate the imperial state machine to advance their particular goals.

Finally, by following the gradual incorporation of higher levels of government in the Peyaru affair and the internal contradictions deriving from the Company's multi-levelled administrative structure, we come to

see how the colonial state incurred considerable difficulty in maintaining coherent and durable policies. While Tapp is primarily preoccupied with his inability to punish the refractory wazir, the government's concern with peace on its borders ultimately overrides his attempts to redress the continual affronts to his pride. Indeed, the case could have been swiftly settled had Tapp ascertained Peyaru's legal status in accordance with Sikh Law from the start. The latter held that a subject of Lahore (or its dependencies) remained liable to the Khalsa for a period of up to two years after his departure from Sikh (or Sikh-dependent) territory. This provision explains the contradictory statements of Bashahr and Kullu regarding Peyaru's period of residence in Nerth (2.5 and 1.5 years respectively), the embattled sides' awareness of these niceties standing in stark opposition to Tapp's failure to pursue the point (IOR\_B: Political Letter to India, 19 February 1840, fo. 3-4). Instead, the agent quickly gets entangled in a web of lies and manipulations intended to draw him farther from the truth and closer to each of the quarrelling sides. Swept up by Kapuru's rhetoric, Tapp is bent on exercising his pseudo-royal rights by illegally threatening the wazir in the Company's name.<sup>20</sup>

As such, the political agent's conduct betrays an all too familiar pitfall of the colonial encounter, whereby the foreign administrator's self-perceived righteousness results in the overriding of his original mandate and undermines the legality of his actions. In Tapp's defence, it may be argued that his position was bound to exceed its limitations: although officially entrusted with a 'political' post, the officer also functioned as a military commander and civil administrator in a little known and sensitively situated part of British India. The fluctuation between spheres of authority is accentuated on the frontier, where the external relations of imperial policy come to the fore, creating an altogether new hybrid post.<sup>21</sup>

In the final analysis, the Peyaru affair is representative of the complexities entailed in British administration in the West Himalayas during the first

---

20 The illegality of Tapp's action was observed by a later commentator, who remarked that he 'cannot think that under any circumstances Col. Tapp could be justified in threatening with punishment the minister of an independent province' (IOR\_A: note on the margin of Tapp to Kupuru Singh, 8 December 1837, fo. 24-5).

21 It is indeed Tapp who communicated with the exiled prince of Ladakh and ultimately provided him with land (*jāgīr*) in Kotgarh, thereby incidentally making him a neighbour of the Kullu wazir.

half of the nineteenth century; the persistent vitality of indigenous power configurations and norms of governance expose the tenuousness of the Company official's hold over his jurisdiction. Tapp's lonesome attempts at instating Company rule along the Himalayan border are repeatedly muffled by the local rulers' political manoeuvrings, the agent ultimately emerging as a marginalized figure too heavily encumbered by his superiors' directives (e.g. adherence to administrative reforms, imperial policy) to live up to his role as the source of political authority. In the end, it is Tapp's profound inability to come to terms with the political culture surrounding him that best characterizes his position, a situation that according to one observer was the reason why the Englishmen in the Himalayas 'remain so completely alien to the people they rule' (Jacquemont 1841: 514).

## References

### Archival sources

Oriental and Indian Office Collections, British Library, London  
 India Office Records, Board of Control Records 1784-1858  
 F/4/1795/73789 (IOR\_A)  
 F/4/1829/75544 (IOR\_B)

### Books and articles

- Datta, C.L. 1973. *Ladakh and Western Himalayan Politics 1819-1848: The Dogra conquest of Ladakh, Baltistan and West Tibet and reactions of other powers*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Government of the Punjab. 1995 [1910]. *Punjab States Gazetteer Vol. VII: Gazetteer of the Simla hill states 1910*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1911. *Record of the Delhi Residency Agency*. Lahore: Punjab Government Press.
- Hopkins, B.D. 2008. *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Howell, G. 1917. 'Some Notes on Ancient Kulu Politics'. *Journal of the Panjab Historical Society* 6[2]: 69-81.
- Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J.-P. 1999 [1933]. *History of the Panjab Hill States*. Delhi: Low Price Publications.
- Jacquemont, V. 1841. *Correspondance de V. Jacquemont avec sa famille et plusieurs*

- de ses amis pendant son voyage dans l'Inde (1828-1832)*. Paris: Garnier Frères.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1933. *État Politique et Social de l'Inde du Nord en 1830: extraits de son journal de voyage*. Paris: l'Académie des Sciences Coloniales et la Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Françaises.
- Metcalf, T. 1994. *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Hanlon, R. 1988. 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia'. *Modern Asian Studies* 22[1]: 189-224.
- Singh, H. [1885]. *Majmua Tawarikh Riyaste Kohistan-Panjab, Part III: Kullu*, translated and reedited by Tobdan in *Kullu: A study in history (from the earliest to AD 1900)*, pp. 73-100. Delhi: Book India Publishing Co.
- Stokes, E. 1969 [1959]. *The English Utilitarians and India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tobdan. 2002. *Kullu: A Study in History (from the earliest to AD 1900)*. Delhi: Book India Publishing Co.
- Yapp, M.E. 1980. *Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran and Afghanistan 1798-1850*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.