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Between Independence and Accession: Analyzing Maharaja Hari Singh's Political Calculations in 1947

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Abstract

In 1947, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, led by Maharaja Hari Singh, navigated a fraught path between joining India or Pakistan or remaining independent. This study examines his political calculations during that critical period. It analyzes primary sources such as Hari Singh's correspondence with Lord Mountbatten and contemporary reports, alongside scholarship by historians like Hewitt, Schofield, Bose, and Snedden. Initially, Maharaja Hari Singh sought a neutral, independent status for Kashmir – even describing it as a potential "Switzerland of the East" – and pursued standstill agreements with both new dominions. However, mounting pressures – including internal unrest in Poonch and the Kashmiri National Conference, a Pakistani-instigated blockade and tribal invasion, and intense diplomatic pressure from India – eroded this stance. By late October 1947, facing an existential threat from armed raiders, Hari Singh capitulated. He signed the Instrument of Accession to India on 26 October 1947, conditioning India's military aid on accession. This paper traces these developments in detail, situating the Maharaja's decisions in their political and historical context.

Keywords: Jammu and Kashmir; Maharaja Hari Singh; Partition 1947; Standstill Agreement; Poonch Rebellion; Instrument of Accession

Introduction

As British rule in South Asia ended in 1947, the fate of over 500 princely states, including the strategically vital Jammu and Kashmir, hung in the balance. Jammu & Kashmir was unique: ruled by Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh but with a Muslim-majority population and borders contiguous with both India and Pakistan (and even China and the Soviet sphere). In this context Hari Singh initially proclaimed that he wanted time to "take time to decide to which Dominion I should accede or whether … it is not in the best interests … to stand independent". He envisioned Kashmir as a "completely neutral" buffer – a "Switzerland of the East" – rather than joining either dominion. This stance set the stage for a tense game of diplomacy and brinksmanship. Scholars have noted that Hari Singh's "intense angling" between India and Pakistan only ended with his accession to India. This paper examines how the Maharaja's calculations evolved from independence to accession. Using archival correspondence, standstill agreements, and historical analyses, it explores the competing pressures – domestic and international – that influenced his decision in late 1947.

Literature Review

Historical studies on Kashmir's accession highlight the interplay of internal dissent and external coercion. Hewitt (1997) observes that Hari Singh "was thinking of joining neither

state, but of becoming an independent country in his own right," and in fact *"held out for an independent state until October 1947". Schofield and Bose similarly emphasize the diplomatic gambits of 1947. Schofield notes the "hurried nature of the accession" amidst mounting unrest and invasion, while Bose underlines the strategic importance of Kashmir to both dominions. Christopher Snedden details the internal revolts (such as the Poonch uprising) that undercut Hari Singh's rule, and Alastair Lamb and others critique the Indian-Pakistani maneuvering around Kashmir. In short, the literature frames Hari Singh's dilemma as driven by the twin forces of internal rebellion and external pressure. This study builds on that scholarship by closely tracing Hari Singh's own actions and contemporaneous documents from August through October 1947.

Background: Hari Singh's Independence Policy

Maharaja Hari Singh's initial policy was to keep all options open. As British paramountcy lapsed on 15 August 1947, he announced that Jammu & Kashmir would remain technically independent and sought standstill agreements with both India and Pakistan. On 12 August 1947 Kashmir's Prime Minister sent identical telegrams to New Delhi and Karachi proposing that all pre-Partition arrangements continue unchanged. Pakistan immediately accepted the standstill in principle, whereas India asked that Kashmir send a delegation to Delhi to negotiate such an agreement. Hari Singh, however, did not appoint a representative to Delhi, and no formal agreement was signed with India (even as bureaucratic continuity with Pakistan ostensibly remained in place). Thus by late August Kashmir had signed a standstill accord only with Pakistan.

Throughout this period Hari Singh insisted on preserving Kashmir's autonomy. In correspondence with Lord Mountbatten (the Governor-General of India), he explained that Jammu & Kashmir had strong economic and cultural links with both dominions and even shared borders with Soviet and Chinese territory. He reiterated his commitment to neutrality: *"I wanted to take time to decide to which Dominion I should accede or whether it is not in the best interests of both Dominions and of my State to stand independent, of course, with friendly and cordial relations with both". This stance was rooted in realpolitik. A formal accession either way would surrender much of the Maharaja's sovereignty, whereas independence offered him maximum leverage. British and Indian officials were dismayed – Lord Mountbatten himself warned the Maharaja in June 1947 that he needed to make a choice, but Hari Singh remained aloof. In retrospect, as Vernon Hewitt summarizes, he "decided to remain independent" and refused to accede until late October.

Hari Singh also sought to organize Kashmir internally under his preferred team. In September he indicated a willingness to include Sheikh Abdullah (leader of the Kashmir National Conference) in power: in his 26 October letter he even named Abdullah for the post of Prime Minister in an interim government. The National Conference was largely pro-India and dominated the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley, whereas in western Jammu (e.g. Poonch) the rival Muslim Conference and local grievances were growing. Nevertheless, the Maharaja tried to project an image of conciliating both sides while he privately hedged his bets on independence.

Standstill Agreements and Initial Negotiations

On 15 August 1947, India and Pakistan became independent dominions. At that point, Kashmir's government formally offered to continue all administrative arrangements with both countries through interim standstill agreements. In effect, water, electricity, postal, and travel links would remain as under British India. Pakistan agreed on 15 August, and thereafter Pakistani officials even ran Kashmir's post and telegraph services under the agreement. India, however, took a hard line: its provisional government insisted on re-negotiation. The Viceroy's Council (headed by Mountbatten) sent a message that Kashmir should send a minister to Delhi to complete the standstill deal. No Kashmiri minister went; accounts suggest the Maharaja hesitated to commit or feared political fallout in Kashmir. Consequently no standstill agreement was concluded with India.

This split had immediate consequences. Without a formal agreement, India treated its obligations as lapsed. In late August, Indian authorities cut off parts of the electrical power and water supply to Kashmir on the pretext that the existing treaty ties had ended. Pakistan, meanwhile, only partially honored the standstill: it allowed its electricity and postal links to continue but began to apply pressure in other ways. By mid-September, as one account notes, lorries carrying petrol, sugar, salt and clothes for J&K were being stopped on the Pakistan side. This "economic blockade" was widely interpreted as Pakistan's attempt to coerce Kashmir into accession to Pakistan. (The Pakistani government denied this, blaming logistical issues.)

India's holdback also had strategic impact: Kashmir's winter season approached, threatening to isolate the state. On 27 September, Prime Minister Nehru wrote a private note warning that the situation was "dangerous and deteriorating" and predicting that Pakistan intended to "infiltrate into Kashmir now" before snow blocked the passes. With pressures mounting, Hari Singh's gambit of stalling indefinitely began to unravel. In effect, his standstill diplomacy kept Kashmir nominally independent but at the cost of incurring Indian distrust and Pakistani hostility.

Internal Political Unrest (National Conference, Poonch Rebellion)

Hari Singh's political struggles were compounded by unrest within his own state. In the Kashmir Valley, Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference had broad support (its secular platform appealed to most Muslims) and generally favored union with India. The Maharaja reportedly planned to bring Abdullah into government to stabilize the state under a pro-Indian leader. In contrast, the western districts of Jammu Province (notably Poonch) saw an open revolt against the Maharaja in 1947. Motivated by grievances over heavy taxation, loss of wartime benefits and alleged repression, Poonch's Muslim population (including ex-servicemen) rebelled starting in the spring of 1947. By October 1947 the insurgents had even declared a separate "Azad (Free) Kashmir" state, with support and arms from Pakistani organizers.

This internal divide meant that as Kashmir approached its critical moment, the Maharaja could not rely on unified support. The National Conference, under Abdullah, was largely cooperative with Indian authorities, and in fact NC volunteers joined Indian troops later to fight the invaders. Meanwhile, the Poonch rebellion grew more intense. British accounts (cited by later

scholars) note that by early October the Maharaja was reporting "reports" of armed bands infiltrating the state and mounting a blockade. In public, Indian leaders soon cited Poonch as evidence of Muslim dissatisfaction with Hari Singh's rule. The combination of valley support for accession and popular revolt in Jammu underscored the state's fragmentation. Hari Singh's strategy of brokering an independent position was progressively undermined by these internal revolts, which blurred with the external tribal incursions to come.

Economic Blockade and Pakistani Pressure

Alongside internal unrest, Kashmir faced overt pressure from Pakistan. After signing the standstill, Pakistan controlled the supply lines along the North-West Frontier bordering Kashmir. In late September 1947, Pakistani authorities began intercepting and seizing essential goods bound for Kashmir. Reporters later observed that "lorries carrying petrol, sugar, salt, clothes, etc. for J&K were being stopped on the Pakistan side," widely seen as an attempted embargo to force the Maharaja's hand. Pakistan denied responsibility, but the effect was clear: Kashmir's towns and troops faced shortages of fuel and food even as winter neared.

More ominously, incursions of militant tribesmen started as well. By early October Hari Singh was warning of "Afridis, soldiers in plain clothes, and desperadoes with modern weapons" infiltrating Kashmir. He wrote that these armed bands were allowed to slip across the border into the Rajouri and Poonch areas, where Jammu's sparse forces were already stretched by the Poonch rebellion. His 26 October letter to Mountbatten graphically described "murder, rape, arson and looting" by the raiders, who appeared intent on capturing Srinagar itself. In sum, Pakistani policy combined an economic blockade with covert military aid to irregular fighters – acts which Hari Singh branded as "conspiratorial" breaches of the standstill. International observers later noted that by late 1947 Pakistan "immediately violated" its standstill by such acts (cutting supplies and sponsoring raids).

In these circumstances Hari Singh's position grew desperate. The blockade squeezed Kashmir economically, while armed infiltrators threatened its security. The Maharaja repeatedly sent telegrams to Islamabad urging it to control the militants, to no avail. He also protested that Pakistan's engineers and telegraph operators – deployed under the standstill agreement – were now effectively aiding the raiders. Thus, by mid-October 1947 the "independence" policy was no longer tenable: Kashmir was under siege from without even as parts of it had broken away in revolt.

Indian Political Engagement and Pressure

India's approach hardened as the crisis unfolded. After initially deferring Kashmir's fate, New Delhi now mobilized under Prime Minister Nehru and Home Minister Patel to secure Kashmir's accession (partly to protect its northern borders). Indian officials made clear that any military aid or assistance would require the Maharaja's formal accession. Indeed, India began planning military airlifts to Srinagar even as it awaited the signed Instrument of Accession. In this phase Hari Singh received urgent envoys from New Delhi, including V.P. Menon – Sardar Patel's top States Ministry advisor – who arrived in Srinagar on 25 October 1947. Menon's mandate was explicit: to discuss requests for armed assistance, cooperation with

Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference, and "J&K's willingness to accede to the Dominion of India".

By this time the Indian leadership was alarmed. Nehru had written to Patel on 27 September that he believed Pakistan would try to "infiltrate into Kashmir now and … take some big action" once winter set in. That prediction proved accurate: large-scale tribal assault began on 22 October from the North-West Frontier Province. India responded by rushing troops by air to Srinagar on 26–27 October to block the invasion, but only after Hari Singh agreed to join India. In the cabinet debates of those days, Mountbatten and other leaders repeatedly stressed the need to honor Kashmir's 'Accession' (through the people's consent or otherwise). Mountbatten himself argued that even after accession, a plebiscite should be held eventually to confirm the Maharaja's decision. However, the immediate priority was clear: halt the invasion.

Faced with a collapsing situation, Hari Singh effectively had no choice left. He made one last appeal: in his letter to Mountbatten on 26 October (the day before signing), he pleaded urgently for military help, writing "a grave emergency has arisen in my State" and warning that failure to receive aid would leave Kashmir "to the tender mercies of these freebooters". But India held firm on its terms. Menon later recounted that New Delhi was determined that no aid would be given unless and until Kashmir's ruler executed the Instrument of Accession. In effect, Indian pressure matched Pakistani pressure: each side would support Kashmir only on its own constitutional terms.

Decision to Accede to India

Under the combined weight of tribal invasion and blockade, Maharaja Hari Singh finally relented. Late on 25 October he agreed to sign the Instrument of Accession. On 26 October 1947 the Maharaja (from Jammu) formally signed the document ceding defence, foreign affairs, and communications to India. In doing so, he effectively ended the "intense angling" between the two dominions. Mountbatten accepted the Instrument on 27 October, and that night Indian troops were flown into Srinagar to turn back the invasion. Public announcements of the accession were made on 27–28 October: simultaneously the Maharaja's letter and the text of the Instrument were published domestically and internationally. In his accompanying letter Hari Singh justified the decision by explicitly blaming Pakistan – noting that its forces had violated the standstill and were now overrunning the state.

The effect was immediate: accession brought Indian Army units under Governor-General control, legitimizing their deployment to defend Kashmir. Indian leaders, while welcoming the accession, still promised a future plebiscite to let Kashmiris ratify the decision. (Mountbatten wrote that "the question…should be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people," and New Delhi publicly vowed a plebiscite after law and order were restored.) None of that came to pass in 1947, but it underscored the fragile nature of Hari Singh's late choice: accession was a pragmatic concession to immediate necessity. As one contemporary summary notes, "the Maharaja acceded … thereby ending the intense angling" for Kashmir.

Conclusion

Maharaja Hari Singh's October 1947 decision was the outcome of a complex interplay of strategy and crisis. Initially determined to keep Kashmir independent, he leveraged both dominions' interest in Kashmir to strengthen his own position. His standstill agreements and delay tactics reflected an astute calculation to maximize sovereignty. However, this strategy unraveled under dual pressures. Domestically, unrest (especially the Poonch rebellion) weakened his control and aligned local Muslims against him; internationally, Pakistani subterfuge and economic coercion undermined the standstill; and Indian insistence – backed by the threat of abandoning Kashmir to chaos – left him little alternative. By late October the situation had become an existential emergency: "the other alternative…is to leave my state and my people to freebooters", Hari Singh warned. Faced with that reality, he chose security via accession.

In sum, the Maharaja's late-1947 pivot was less a sudden volte-face than a reluctant response to an untenable status quo. His initial hopes for an independent Kashmir were dashed by Pakistan's economic blockade and tribal onslaught, as well as by India's conditional diplomacy. The accession, executed amid crisis, symbolized the collapse of his independence policy. As scholars conclude, Hari Singh "ultimately agreed to join India in exchange for help against invading Pakistani herders". This decision, though pragmatic at the moment, launched the enduring dispute over Kashmir's status – a legacy of the very pressures and compromises analyzed here.

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