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The Indian Princes and their States

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Barbara Ramusack bases her study of indirect rule under British imperialism mainly on research, including her own, which has been done since the 1960s. As she reiterates throughout the book, the topic of the ?Native States? is not one which has attracted widespread scholarly attention. The main weight of research on the colonial period lies in British India, the three-fifths of the sub-continent which was under direct imperial administration. With the development of relatively new understandings and theories during the last 25 years concerning the structure and nature of indigenous rule, it seems possible that new generations of students of India will want to know how pre-colonial political institutions fared under European domination. Signs of movement in that direction include Marzia Balzani?s study of ritual of the Jodhpur royal court, *Modern Indian Kingship: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Rajasthan*.(1)

In the meantime, Ramusack?s book provides a serviceable overview of major issues to take into considerable when approaching the topic of indirect rule and its consequences. The task is daunting, partly because there were different kinds of pre-colonial states, because British policy was not clear-cut or consistent, and because most archives of the princely states are incomplete. Ramusack is to be commended for sorting through a wide range of issues and finding ways to illustrate her points with the literature and archival sources which are at hand.

How many princely states were there? Ramusack reports (p. 2) that the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*,

published in 1909, listed 693, including Nepal and the Shan states in Burma, but that the Report of the Indian States Committee of 1929 gave a total of 562. Of the latter, 327 were described as estates, *jagirs* (a type of estate) and ?others?. Estates numbering 108 rated inclusion in the imperial advisory body, the Chamber of Princes.

The author follows her introductory chapter with one which includes categorisation of princely states before 1800 as: 1) antique, including Rajput states; 2) successor, including Hyderabad and Awadh; and 3) warrior or conquest states, including Bhopal and Mysore. She briefly outlines the evolution of major princely states before the British accelerated processes of imperial incorporation in the early nineteenth century. Overall, the book focuses on those states which were still in existence in 1858, which were able to retain some aspects of sovereign status and which were recognised as having superior rank in the twentieth century by being included in the Chamber of Princes.

Ramusack endeavours to show that during the period of British imperialism these polities represented continuing processes of state formation and that their rulers exerted considerable powers, enjoying authority in their domains. Her intention is to undermine the perception that the princes were only creatures of British rule, engaging in meaningless ritual displays, at the same time as she points to their loss of the major privileges and responsibilities of defense, external affairs and communications.

In chapter 3, Ramusack discusses the political and diplomatic tools and frameworks of indirect rule, outlining how this form of imperial governance evolved. She argues that, while she can devise a scheme of three major periods in which client states were incorporated, these are not clear-cut in outline. Imperial policies of annexation existed in tension with impulses for incorporation under indirect rule. Similarly, there were many and varying reasons for British officers to intervene or not to intervene in the affairs of princely states. There was no clear and direct evolution of policy, but officers acted pragmatically and/or opportunistically, depending on the circumstances. The general pattern was from treaties to subsidiary alliances to indirect rule. Her major periods are: 1) 1765?85, the leadership of Robert Clive and Warren Hastings; 2) 1798?1805, the governor-generalship of Lord Wellesley; and 3) 1813?23, the governor-generalship of Lord Hastings. After Hastings, annexation continued simultaneously with the expansion of indirect rule, extending into a new period under Lord Dalhousie. Ramusack illustrates processes with the judicious use of examples.

Since the construction of imperial governance occurred pragmatically and not with consistent policies, British officials felt keenly the need to produce documents which would explain what they had been doing and what precedents they could follow. Ramusack treats this topic in chapter 4, ?The theory and experience of indirect rule in colonial India?. Here she is concerned to explain the erection of ?the intellectual framework of indirect rule? (p. 88). In so doing, Ramusack also discusses the role of imperial ritual ? including the Imperial Assemblage of 1877 and the Imperial Durbars of 1903 and 1911 ? as British officers attempted both to express and to create the desired political order. They wanted a ?feudal hierarchy? and to set the princes off as ?natural? leaders, who were to support the paramount power and benefit the imperial state economically (p. 92). The activities of compiling documents and forming legal arguments bore fruit in that, after 1858, the British were able to maintain hegemony in India without further annexation. The system which was devised had the advantages of providing the imperial government with inexpensive means of governing areas of relatively low agricultural productivity and often inaccessible populations.

Chapters 5?7 focus on selected princely rulers and states. Ramusack persuasively argues against notions of the princely states as areas where an unchanging India remained intact under the empire. She illustrates that the various and changing relationships between princes and the paramount power gave differential room for manoeuvre for princes, depending on their personal strengths and the resources ? material and symbolic ? at their command.

In chapter 5, ?Princes as men, women, rulers, patrons and oriental stereotypes?, Ramusack writes that her aim is to expand on ?what it meant to be a ruling prince?, concentrating on the period 1870?1947 (p. 132). She takes up important themes, including princely life cycles, sources of legitimacy, activities of patronage

and various constructions of the princes, positive and negative. Ramusack points out, for example, that, in accordance with common assumptions, princes played an important role as patrons of indigenous arts during the colonial period. However, what has not been generally recognised, she argues, is that they also played culturally innovative roles with regard to establishing museums or promoting photography. Students of Indian monarchy who are accustomed to interpretations of symbolic uses and changes in symbolic usage with reference to monarchical meaning will be disappointed with the author?s approach. Her discussion tends toward the practical.

The presentation of administrative and economic structures in the following chapter illustrates that radical change in governance took place in princely states such as Travancore, Mysore and Baroda. Still, as in British India, state administration rarely penetrated past district governance into villages. To a wide extent, however, some states copied the revenue practices and legal system of direct rule. Public works and education could be targets of princely attention. With growing bureaucratisation in some states came the importation of high caste, western-style educated officials from British India. They tended to arrange for the employment of other ?outsiders? at lower levels of the princely state administration, a practice that was resented by local aristocracies. Employment in the states attracted ambitious men who could not find similar scope for their talents in the directly ruled provinces.

An important issue which Ramusack addresses is that of the purported economic backwardness of the princely states, compared to directly ruled areas. In a comparison of ninety-eight states (89 per cent of the total princely population in 1931) with fifty-four ?comparable? British districts, John Hurd argued in the 1970s that princely states lagged behind (pp. 196?97). Hurd found one explanation for this to be British policies hindering growth. Another reason was historical development in the states themselves, such as the continuing presence of *jagirdari* estates which, he argued, undermined the strength of state treasuries. Citing later research which conceptualised the subcontinent as an indivisible economy, Ramusack argues that, given India?s heterogeneity, a method of investigation which focuses on developmental history in discrete political units is desirable. Given the present paucity of research on the economy of areas under princely rule, her suggestion appears sound. From the work which we do have, British policy appears to be consistently protective of the interests of the imperial state in the area of explicit or implicit economic policy toward the princely states. Officials interfered in undertakings only when the interests of the imperial regime would be affected. They did not rush to the assistance of princely governments when ?unscrupulous investors concluded questionable deals?, even when the investors were British (p. 199).

In approaching the topic of society and politics in the princely states, the author finds some of Benedict Andersen?s formulations useful.(2) She refers specifically to issues of mapping and census-taking. With regard to the latter, Ramusack follows a common line of interpretation in recent years in the field of South Asian studies. This interpretation finds ?colonial sociology? (what she refers to as ?British Orientalist constructions?) stimulating ethnic mobilisation in the production of censuses, gazetteers, religious writings and newspapers (p. 212). Princes also contributed to ethnic mobilisation, she states, through patronage of caste histories and religious translations, to give two examples. Caste, religious and linguistic identities became more tightly defined in the princely states, while the nationalist mobilisations found in British India took longer to develop.

The idealist focus on British Orientalist constructions neglects the impact of greater centralisation through bureaucratisation on state?society relations in both the directly and the indirectly ruled areas of the subcontinent. During the modern period, ethnic mobilisation has been the effect of greater state penetration, as communities have undergone reorganisation and re-identification in attempts to influence governing policies and the distribution of state resources; this process is not just evident in the Indian Empire, but also more generally across the world.

Mobilisation took place in the princely states in three phases, the first phase emerging mostly during the 1910s and 1920s among literate groups. The latter were preoccupied with issues of government employment, social benefits and freedom of expression. The second phase, beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s, is characterised by urban élites taking a more confrontational style, engaging in public demonstrations as they

demanded greater popular representation and expanded political rights of organisation. Peasant movements emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, seeking changes in relations of land tenure. In none of the phases was opposition to princely rule expressed.

Opposition to princely rule was also slow to emerge in the nationalist mobilisations in British India. Ramusack outlines the ambivalent relationship between the Indian National Congress and princely regimes, giving a decisive role to M. K. Gandhi, who advocated non-interference in the states until the late 1930s. Part of Gandhi?s purported positive attitude toward the princely states may have been due, the author states, to his desire to maintain ties with conservative Indians. She puts to rest the common perception that outsiders from British India initiated political mobilisation in the states. While nationalist activities in British India had an impact on political development, local figures dominated.

In the final full chapter (followed by an epilogue), Ramusack outlines major events in the negotiations in the 1930s and 1940s which led to the princely states being incorporated into independent India and Pakistan. She points out that the princes were at a disadvantage in that they did not have long and broad experience of collective negotiations. They had difficulty in deciding what their mutual best interests were and in staying united.

Ramusack?s assertions that the princely states were not imperial creations, that princes continued to rule in major ways and that processes of state formation continued to take place under the empire are valuable as we think in terms of agendas for future research in this area. Now that much necessary ground has been covered with the appearance of this book, one hopes that it will be possible for more emphasis on *processes* of political and ideological change in indigenous adaptations to conditions of European imperial rule.

Notes

1. Marzia Balzani, *Modern Indian Kingship: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Rajasthan* (Oxford, 2003).Back to (1)
2. Benedict Andersen, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991).Back to (2)

The author appreciates this thorough and thoughtful review and hopes to be able to respond in a few months.

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