

The Indian Princes and their States (The New Cambridge History of India)

By Barbara N. Ramusack

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As Barbara N. Ramusack demonstrates in *The Indian Princes and their States*, princely states - these medieval throwbacks - make up an essential though often missing part of the puzzle of modern history. For a variety of reasons, but certainly on account of the princely states' speedy accession to independent India in 1948, they have been eclipsed from standard textbook narratives of the Indian past. It is as if the princes were forever destined only to flavor the unity of the modern nation-state as emblems of traditional India, and nothing else. Their iconic status in modern Indian society indicates their dissolution from history proper and absorption into the stuff of memory and fantasy. Today one is more likely to faintly remember the Maharaja of Udaipur's stately palace in the James Bond film *Octopussy* or India Airways' cherubic, but mustachioed princely mascot than know the name of any historical Indian prince. This is generally because the history of the princely states remains tangential to the narrative of colonial domination and nationalist resistance. So even some professional historians may find themselves hard pressed to explain the process by which various imperial polities in the late Mughal era fractured into discrete princely states and became firmly ensconced in the British imperial order. But for the era of Asiatic researches and early nationalism, the princely states produced particularly intractable problems of sovereignty, constitutionalism, and India's uneven assimilation and resistance to imperial cultural norms. To the degree these problems appear salient for understanding our post-imperial world, the portrait Ramusack paints of the Indian princes is bound to entice us.

The view that Ramusack offers of the princely states is panoramic, encompassing social, political and cultural consequences of India's contact and intercourse with the modern imperial system. Her recounting of the princes' tale reaches back into the pre-colonial past with one eye firmly set on enduring traditions and the other on the course of far-reaching innovations. The princely state may have had its genesis as an "antique state", according to Ramusack, or it may have been a breakaway "successor state", such as Awadh under Safdar Jang, or in a more

problematic way, it could have simply been a "conquest state", as the Marathas or Tipu Sultan's regime are dubbed. Though she includes Jammu-Kashmir in the latter category - after all, what state is not a "conquest state"? - this state was only created after the British annexed Punjab in 1848 and sold control over the region to the Rajput Maharaja Gulab Singh for Rs. 7,500,000. A conquest of convenience, or favorable circumstances, one must presume.

And thus begins the presentation of a history of the princely state form, moving along rough conceptual bases from the very start, through the system of indirect rule, and into modern consumerist fantasy. All along Ramusack's diligence in surveying the primary and secondary literature makes for a rich empirical quality, which certainly makes the chapters on patronage, administrative and economic structures, society and politics worth reading. But all along, more always seems to crop up than can be sustained by her analytic framework. Even if she may realize that her categories and periodizations, derived from different strains of existing scholarship, are not quite adequate or adaptable to her empirical findings, she is more inclined to summarize and qualify rather than boldly re-haul, systematize and assert afresh. This is most evident when Ramusack espouses the three distinct periods of *detente*, incorporation and non-intervention of William Lee-Warner's 1893 *Protected Princes of India*, all the while cognizant that it may "obscure the persistent, underlying juxtaposition of indirect rule and annexation and British non-intervention and intervention in the internal structure and policies of Indian states." The mismatch between the framework and the variegated nature of the empirical record that the work displays may simply be due to the fact that the book contains less an argument than a collection of topics, all generated and organized by the rather simple postulate that "many princes represented a continuity of traditional state formation in India and remained autonomous rulers, exercising substantial authority and power within their state" and were not, as Warren Hastings once described the *de jure* Mughal emperor, "a mere pageant."

What we have then is a particular balancing act at various levels. Ramusack's Indian princes are always struggling to establish some winning equilibrium of political power between themselves and British paramountcy, between their quintessential Indianness and cosmopolitan

ways, between traditional customary law and bureaucratic procedure. Similarly, Ramusack offsets her rather taxing prose with an encyclopedic comprehensiveness. Yet, all in all, whatever the book's shortcomings may be, they are abundantly compensated by the display of fascinating photographs and imperial memorabilia, such as the cigarette cards of Savage and Semi-Barbarous Chiefs and Rulers, or the brilliant reflections of a contemporary, such as Sir Henry Maine's understanding of the new sovereignty as a divisible, composite phenomenon.

At its best, Ramusack's account helps today's researcher track the constitution of a flexible, pragmatically oriented form of imperial domination, which bears traits uncannily similar to today's American hegemony. It also sheds light on the flipside of this form of indirect domination: the creation of internal spheres of relative autonomy in which the defeated figures transfer their political drive onto things like religious practice and aesthetic production, only to eventually deploy the newly stylized cultural motifs in the field of politics proper. That is, the British Empire certainly succeeded in gaining direct jurisdiction over strategic coastal territories of the subcontinent and easily established indirect rule over numerous polities, compelling them to cede tribute, military support, and control over external affairs. Yet in balance, the conditions were created in which the social world could segment into distinct levels and "the cultural" could become the means for intervening in "the political". It is just this very constitution of power which makes intelligible the instances in which princely symbolic resistance was made evident, as when Maharaja Sayaji Rao of Baroda "achieved notoriety" in the 1911 *darbar* or imperial pageant through his "sartorial sins", which were "to wear a simple white Maratha dress without the jewelry the British deemed appropriate for a prince, not to don his sash of the Order of the Star of India, and to carry a walking stick rather than a sword." Along similar lines, Mohandas K. Gandhi exhorted the

Indian princes to become embodiments of *Ramarajya*, his romanticized notion of traditional rule. He opted not to mobilize in princely states, but to simply employ them conceptually for his deep rejection of modernity. Like "Western Civilization", princely statehood also "would have been a good idea" – if only the princes had not begun adopting modern media, transport and administrative techniques on their own. The British imperial order had attempted to integrate all of its constituents into one seamless whole and reproduce it in its own image. But in doing so the British only succeeded in providing the conditions for a cultural cum political refusal. This kind of resistance continues to be voiced, as Ramusack notes, by descendants of the princes in their espousal of culturalist rhetoric on behalf of conservative parties such as the BJP.

It is in ways such as this that *The Indian Princes and their States* can provide interesting leads for tracking the peculiar evolution of our current situation, in which such "authentic" styles of political thinking, organizing and intervening have come, for better or for worse, to predominate over others. The cross section of the modern experience Ramusack reassembles in this study of the Indian princes makes up a valuable vantage point for grasping the historical evolution of the Indian elite, traditional icons and translocal linkages. This is because the Indian princes virtually enfolded within themselves the cultural contradictions of East and West of the colonial period, ushered in the era of the modern political spectacle from a misty domain of the past, and through their progeny gave birth to a new "aristocratic internationalism." The actual body of the old Indian *maharajas* finally expired when Indira Gandhi rescinded their regal purses, titles and privileges in 1971. This annulment brought to an end the final chapter of a medieval political theology. Yet the other body of the king, the "body politic", continues to live on as a purely indeterminate form, autonomous and abiding, awaiting, it seems, for the multitudinous subjects of the world to recognize it as their own.