

Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India. By Manu Bhagavan. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003; pp. xxii + 219. £22.50).

In his book *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India*, Manu Bhagavan argues that princely states, rather than acting as pliant collaborators, exercised a significant amount of sovereignty in their dealings with British rule. Princes, in this case the Gaekwad of Baroda and the Maharaja of Mysore, existed both in the public and private spheres, and it was this unique position which allowed them to challenge British supremacy in the contest of 'modernity'. This was achieved through social reforms, which not only sought to contest the British monopoly of 'progress', but also served as 'a hidden transcript of resistance' (pp. 22, 172). Utilising a diverse number of sources, ranging from printed government publications and manuscripts to British Residency and princely archives, Bhagavan calls for a historiographical remodelling of colonial India, arguing that we must move beyond the notion that princely states were either progressive (the British colonial view) or model states (the Indian nationalist view).

Bhagavan begins by giving a detailed yet succinct insight into the background of British-princely relations, using the example of those with the successive rulers of Mysore and Baroda. Prior to the twentieth century, both kingdoms had complex relationships with the British Raj which affected their approaches to social, political, and educational reform during the 1900s. Since British authority was 'absolute and temperamental', both Sayaji Rao, Gaekwad of Baroda, and Krishnaraja Wadiyar III of Mysore learnt that outright resistance to British rule was impossible, but that more subtle, covert types of resistance were permissible. Recalcitrant behaviour could result in interference, accusations and deposition. Reform was one area in particular where the princes had to engage in a delicate balancing act of diplomacy, while simultaneously cultivating and exercising resistance. The project of 'modernity' – that is, reform along western and hence British lines – was an area in which princes had to appear as progressive, in order to insulate themselves and their kingdoms from accusations of being aloof and 'backward'. Yet at the same time princes were constrained domestically and politically, for reform which could be interpreted as threatening to British influence and supremacy was dangerous. Bhagavan claims this was the most desirable option for the rulers of Baroda and Mysore, but they were fully aware that the prevailing political situation in South Asia would render this extremely dangerous.

Chapter two deals with the different trajectories of reform which the two princely states took. Krishnaraja Wadiyar of Mysore spent much of the 1910s criticising the British at many levels, especially the system of indirect rule. He used the 1902-3 Delhi Durbar as an opportunity to oppose the British and, Bhagavan is keen to note, expressly showed resistance by refusing to participate in the elephant parade and

processions. Sayaji Rao of Baroda, for his part, followed British proposals and recommendations until the release of the Curzon Circular, which stipulated that all princes had to obtain the permission of the Indian government for foreign travel. Sayaji Rao proceeded to write a flurry of letters, criticizing the government and Curzon in particular, arguing that princely rule was a sham and a mere front for the British administration.

Whilst Mysore maintained the political status quo, Baroda undertook a series of significant political and social reforms, ranging from the expansion of local self-government to relief programmes for the poor. British education in India was challenged for being 'not modern', especially in comparison to American universities which, Sayaji Rao argued, were more progressive in their vocational and technical aspects, and in the larger social and civic benefits they provided.

The princes operated in two worlds: those of the colonized and the colonizer. This overlap allowed them to refashion their own version of modernity and consequently challenge British prestige, whilst at the same time insulating themselves from charges of backwardness and anachronism. Colonial superiority that was partially informed by modernity, Bhagavan argues, could be contested through princely reforms and initiatives, for they 'challenged the direction of modernity' (p. 75). This was significant, for it left the British in an awkward predicament. They could neither criticize such reforms, nor allow these two princes to exercise too much sovereignty, as this would undercut British prestige and paramountcy.

Bhagavan brings particular attention to the incident of the 1911 Delhi Durbar. Here, he argues that Sayaji Rao snubbed the British in subtle ways: by not donning his Order of the Star of India sash; by brandishing a gold-tipped cane instead of a customary sword; and by failing to wear ornate dress. This challenged the colonial British fantasies of Indian tradition which, Bhagavan claims, constituted a powerful and important ideology regarding princely India. His utilization of a film historian's research to demonstrate that British reactions to the Gaekwad's actions were largely exaggerated is particularly historiographically refreshing and innovative. Resistance could at times also be more overt. Bhagavan cites the Maharaja of Baroda's communiqué to Curzon upon his departure: 'bon voyage, may India never see the likes of you again' (p. 49).

In Mysore, Wadiyar undertook a significant amount of social reform between 1900 and 1911, leaving the pre-1900 status quo behind. He expanded local self-government and educational access, and created a health department. These were all, Bhagavan argues, not open but clandestine forms of resistance. Yet perhaps this is better viewed not so much as resistance but as a site of contestation. This grants Indians a significant (and much needed) historical agency in refashioning modernity. By demonstrating that the Maharaja had the ability to choose reforms and aspects of modernity and then 'Indianize' them, he is not portrayed as a mere resister or rebel.

Chapter Three continues to investigate the ‘Rebel Academy’ and the negotiations over the proposed Mysore University, which were surprisingly non-confrontational. The University, Bhagavan claims, was a particularly contested site for modernity. Yet elsewhere he claims that the University should be seen as a ‘radical step against imperial domination’ (p. 103). Perhaps he could have clarified this. British attitudes were never entirely at ease with the possibility of an Indian-established university, for it would undercut their prestige and claim to represent modernity, yet the official British response was far from hostile. Bhagavan attributes this to the inherent contradiction of colonial education itself – the British could not demonstrate hostility towards a ‘modern’ project of which the ruling elite were supposedly the exclusive harbingers. Here, Bhagavan is attentive and insightful in focusing attention on the inherent contradictions of colonial education (i.e. the British-claimed representation of universal modernity for which the University stood). The Madras government, for its part, was terribly uneasy with the planned University. Bhagavan argues that this episode demonstrated, through a subtle war of propaganda, that modernity was not necessarily the exclusive domain of the British. This was also significant for unwittingly challenging the perceptual restraints which British rule placed on Indian encounters with modernity, by ensuring that India’s encounter with European modernity was entirely with Britain and not with other European countries. The Mysore government ended up rejecting the demands of both Madras University and the Madras government when it came to influencing the structure and finer points of university management. Bhagavan notes the motive of an emerging ‘Asian progressivism’ (p. 86), yet he could have done more to draw this out.

Chapter four continues the investigation into the ‘Rebel Academy’, by examining the push for a university in Baroda. This, Bhagavan argues, was intertwined with the push for modernity and democratic reform. In the latter case, the Dewan of Baroda, Manubhai Mehta, drew upon multiple non-British sources on modernity and its interpreters, citing Voltaire, Rousseau, Abraham Lincoln, Grover Cleveland and other western intellectuals and Anglo-American statesmen to argue for democratic reform. Bhagavan implies that this also surreptitiously challenged the British monopoly of modernity. Mehta used these insights alongside Indian traditions, and invoked the archaic and indigenous in order to appropriate and contest western modernity. The push for a new University of Baroda without British influence and interference, Bhagavan claims, represented a refashioned and new modernity (p. 131). He gives particular attention to Sayaji Rao’s international outlook, with its emphasis on educational systems from the United States and Germany. This was significant, for it subtly challenged the notion that British rule was an exclusive harbinger of modernity, citing American federal education reforms and the quality of primary schooling in Germany, which put British educational efforts in India to shame. Baroda University finally came into being in 1948. Bhagavan argues that the act of creating the university, rather than its result, constituted the real resistance to British domination.

Chapter Five considers the relationship between the reforms of the princely states, modernity, and Indian nationalism. This is where Bhagavan proves most insightful in his analysis. He demonstrates that the reforms implemented between 1900 and 1930 effectively offered an alternative to Congress-based Indian nationalism, and ensured that the Congress would ultimately fail to mobilize the masses in these two states as it did in British-controlled India. Hence, ideas of modernity would be complicated not only by Indians' contestations with the British, but also amongst themselves. Bhagavan further substantiates his model of an alternative modernity by bringing attention to the fact that posts in both the government and Mysore University showed a significant trend towards equity and progressive norms of social justice, and became less Brahmin-dominated. Perhaps Bhagavan could have done more to compare this with statistics in British administration and university rolls for context. The agitation of the 1940s, Bhagavan argues, should therefore be seen more as a legacy of the 'ideal and progressive princes' than as complaints against princely government.

Bhagavan's analysis and insights are undoubtedly interesting, yet there are a few areas which lend themselves to complication. In marking out the colonially-oriented nature of education, Bhagavan relies heavily on major educational policy statements (i.e. Macaulay's minute on education) and the more official premises of educational policy, instead of considering the nuances of internal difference and competing interests. His approach is therefore somewhat simplistic. He would have enriched his analysis by accounting for the multiplicity of British views towards education, the role of subsidized private institutions (mission schools), and alternative views of modern education (the Deoband Muslim School). Attitudes towards education and its colonial project were far from monolithic, and their multiplicity requires consideration when discussing the imperial aspect of university education.¹ His certainty as to the colonial nature of education also fails to account for the fact that its efficacy as a colonial tool would have been seriously circumscribed by the demand for it from Indian society, which was undoubtedly striking by the end of the nineteenth century. Universities and colleges were full, if not overflowing, and some schools relied heavily on the patronage and funding of Indian elites that did not challenge the direction of modernity. A failure to account for such demand might be construed as implying that Indians were merely passive receptors of western and university education, and that the evolution of educational reform was a by-product of high officialdom. 'Rebel Academies' should therefore be seen not so much as simple 'assault[s] on the ideological soul of colonialism' (p. 8) but as genuine and successful contestations of one of the many premises for British rule.

Bhagavan's use of the states of Baroda and Mysore is also highly selective. He could be clearer as to what degree they were actually representative of princely India. Other scholars have demonstrated that some princes did not resist modernity, and in fact extra-governmental organizations were used as tools in British dealings with the state of Travancore.²

Bhagavan's foundational premise for the encounter between the British and India's princes, that colonial rule was ultimately founded upon difference, is also somewhat simplistic. British fascination with the vestiges of Indian aristocracy and royalty was more complicated and nuanced. British feelings towards Indian princes were by no means always hostile and hidebound, but were often characterized by a degree of admiration and curious affinity.³ Bhagavan continually reiterates that the British felt innately superior to and different from Indian princes and vestiges of the Indian aristocracy, yet at the same time concedes that 'debt and annual deficit were central in British criticisms' (p. 41). Perhaps he could have clarified his own stance on this matter.

Bhagavan also seems to overstate the significance of Orientalism's driving notion of difference. He implies that it permeated every aspect of colonial Indian society, and thus makes it the fulcrum of his argument. He could have been more attentive to that fact that such sentiments were more characteristic of publications such as *The Englishman*, a mouthpiece of Anglo-Indian society, than of the multiplicity of views in India towards race. Although the importance of racism and Orientalist thinking in colonial India is undeniable, Bhagavan's assertion of its centrality seems to endorse Edward Said's oversimplified notion that Europeans were always racist all the time.⁴ Yet Bhagavan's notion of difference also suggests that the 'othering'⁵ of India was monolithic, and that this marginalized both Indian agency and alternative European viewpoints. The manner in which the basis for encounters between India and the British is set up disallows a multiplicity of racial views, and fails to consider recent scholarship which has done much to question the notion of a monolithic and unique European Orientalism and ideas of difference.⁶

Emphasizing sovereignty in its own right, as the title seems to imply, would fail to account for interaction and sites of contestation in colonial India. Bhagavan's research is more convincing from an historiographical perspective, than in his analysis of the nuances of colonial difference, education and princely resistance. Yet British-princely relations were undoubtedly complex, and Bhagavan's work brings insight into an often neglected sphere of modern South Asia. Even though some chapters are at times analytically stretched, *Sovereign Spheres* is still a welcome addition to our historical literature.

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NOTES:

¹ This is one major shortcoming of G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1998), upon which Bhagavan bases much of his assertion that university education resembled a colonial project.

² K. Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore, 1858-1936* (New Delhi: OUP, 1998).

³ D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

⁴ E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁵ See Inden's statement that 'the formation of Indological discourse made it possible' for 'European scholars, traders and administrators to appropriate the power of Indians (not only the "masses" but also the "elite") to act for themselves'. R. Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India', *MAS*, 20:3 (1986), p. 403; R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

⁶ Wide-ranging examples include: T. Trautmann, 'Inventing the History of South India' in D. Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: the Uses of History in South Asia* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999); T. Trautmann, *The Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); N. Peabody, 'Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43:4 (2001); W. Pinch, 'Same Differences in India and Europe', *History and Theory*, 38:3 (1999); R. Eaton, 'Reimagining the Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India', *Journal of World History*, 11:1 (2000); M. Tavakoli-Targhi, 'Orientalism's Genesis Amnesia', in *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); J.R.I. Cole, 'Invisible Occidentalism: Eighteenth Century Indo-Persian Constructions of the West', *Iranian Studies*, 3-4 (1992), pp. 3-16.