

The Indian Princes and their States. By Barbara N. Ramusack. Series: The New Cambridge History of India, III. The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society, 6. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; pp. xiv + 309; ill. £45).

Barbara Ramusack's *The Indian Princes and their States* is a significant contribution to the history of princely India and the nature of indirect rule under British paramountcy. Often caricatured as pawns of the British or indolent Oriental despots, the former Indian kings (or 'princes', as they were dubbed by the Raj) have received marginal attention in South Asian studies, which have focused predominantly on subaltern or nationalist interpretations of Indian history.¹ Ramusack's book hopes to do the opposite. As she states in her introduction, 'the synthetic overview presented in this book joins a growing effort to integrate the princes into the grand sweep of modern Indian history' (p. 1). She argues that the princes were powerful political players in pre-colonial, colonial and present-day public life in India.

Before India became independent from British rule in 1947, there were some 600 or more semi-autonomous kingdoms, termed 'princely states', throughout India. Coined the 'native states', they were sharply distinct from the territories of British India. These varying states were as diverse as the nations of Europe. Hyderabad, in the South, was as large as France. Under British suzerainty, the princes held full authority in internal matters of state governance such as taxation, revenue collection, criminal and judicial legal systems and the development of educational and cultural institutions. They attempted to combine indigenous notions of *rajadharma* (kingly duty) with British models of good governance (p. 2). The rulers of these states belonged to varying religious, caste and regional identities. Some dynasties upheld primogeniture; others were matrilineal in succession. Of these 600 princes, 10-17% exercised vital powers in local, regional and all-Indian imperial politics during the British colonial period (p. 8). Since independence, a number have remained prominent in postcolonial, democratic politics (p. 8).

If the princes controlled such 'substantial wealth and power', why is there such a 'historical lacuna'? Ramusack argues that there are three prevailing reasons why the princes have been neglected in Indian history. Firstly, she suggests that both colonial and postcolonial historians have misconstrued the personalities and events that surrounded the princes. Before 1947, British historians, who were often members of the imperial

¹ While there are several scholars working on the Indian princely states, including Ian Copland, Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, Edward Haynes, Robin Jeffrey, John McLeod, William Richter and Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, their historiographies of Indian kingship have not been fully incorporated into broader histories of modern South Asia.

government, either lauded the princes as 'faithful allies', or castigated them for state mismanagement which led to deposition or annexation of their kingdoms. Regarding Indian historians, she points out that they 'produced either hagiographical accounts of the princes as astute political leaders and social reformers or acerbic censures of princely oppression' (p. 9). Postcolonial scholarship has generally concentrated more on the rise of nationalist leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, while emphasizing the 'ineptness' and 'personal degeneracy' of the princes (p. 9).

The second reason she identifies is that, with historical analysis focusing either on British imperial history or the early growth of the Indian nationalist movement, the princes were generally relegated to footnotes. They did not appear to have a place within the dominant spheres of historical analysis, which were situated primarily in British India, where both imperial officials and South Asian nationalists were geographically located (p. 10).

Thirdly, Ramusack admits that primary sources on the princes are limited (p. 10). Until recently archives such as the India Office Library in London did not give access to their documents for a period of fifty years after deposit. In addition, personal papers of former rulers have often been poorly preserved, invariably victims of poor storage environments. In the face of such a paucity of material, a few scholars began research in the 1960s, Ramusack being one of them. Her hope is to 'restore the princes and their states to the history and the future of India' (p. 10). Thus, Ramusack's book has a broad and ambitious scope.

In her second chapter, she provides a broad overview of the princely states prior to 1800, focusing on the role of these kingdoms under the declining power of the Mughal Empire. She categorizes the kingdoms of the time as antique, successor or warrior states. The antique states were mainly composed of ancient Rajput kingdoms in western India; successor states such as Hyderabad and Bengal were challengers to dying Mughal power; and the warrior states constituted the rising star of the Maratha Empire. As Ramusack suggests, despite the waning of the Mughal empire, the eighteenth century was an era of strong states and native capitalists (p. 12). While political power was decentralized, individual states were directly involved in local communities, fostering the development of the British Indian 'regional state' (p. 47).

In Chapter 3, Ramusack provides an historical analysis of early British imperialism and the construction of indirect rule. She argues that the British did not create the Indian princes as natural leaders. Most rulers dubbed princes by the British had existed long before the advent of colonial rule, and had their own forms of military and economic influence. By the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Indian princes had lost many of their sovereign powers through being compelled to sign individual treaties with the East India Company. The British established boundaries on princely rule and extracted resources, such as military personnel and tribute, from the native states (p. 85).

Nonetheless, the relationship between the princes and the paramount power was more complex than a simple paradigm of dominance. It was an interaction that was often mutually beneficial (p. 48). In certain instances, indigenous rulers allied with external powers (which in earlier times would have included Mughal or Maratha sovereigns) to aid in the negotiation of local disputes, such as succession rivalries, or adoptions where there was no direct heir. In this manner, external allies helped balance such regional conflicts (p. 49). Ramusack analyzes closely various components of colonial indirect rule, such as military resources, treaties and letters, maps and surveys, and the role of British political officers. She delineates in detail the various historic events which led to the construction of indirect rule, and suggests that the Indian rulers are 'an excellent prism' through which to view the complex hierarchies of the British Raj in India. The system of indirect rule in the Indian states served as a model in other areas of the Empire, including Malaya and Africa (p. 87).

In Chapter 4, Ramusack deconstructs the role of indirect rule in colonial India as it related to ceremonial, colonial hierarchy, a patron-client relationship between the paramount power and the indigenous princes, and the establishment of the British Political Service, which worked in direct contact with princely India. As Ramusack shows, the British included the princes in a highly nuanced system of ceremony and hierarchy, defined by such 'rites' as seat placements at royal Darbars and the count of gun salutes (the Queen's being 101 and the highest Indian prince's 21) (p. 90). She argues that although the British upheld indirect rule, they were compelled to intervene in the affairs of the princely states for political or economic advantage (p.130). The Political Service was constructed to monitor the native states, and the British officials who were members of it were placed in a paradoxical situation. They simultaneously represented the interests of the princely state they were assigned to and those of the imperial government, which employed them. As valued imperial clients, the princes served many functions for the Raj in India. They provided inexpensive administration over regions not easily governed by British power; they contributed military personnel for the Imperial Service, including forces for the first and second world wars; they were valuable personalities in ceremonial functions, including the tours made by the British royal family in India; and, as natural born leaders, they were useful allies in communal and all-Indian politics (p.131)

Ramusack's fifth chapter on princes as men, women, rulers, patrons and oriental stereotypes is perhaps her most fascinating contribution in this volume. The chapter provides a dynamic and rich overview of the education of princes, male and female rulership, the role of political, dynastic marriages, and the princes as patrons of the arts, literature and religious institutions. It is a dazzling display of the breadth of princely involvement in Indian public and cultural life under British colonialism. As she notes,

succession and marriage disputes served as loci for contention between local groups, which the prince might often use to his advantage (p.167).

Chapter 6 examines the administrative and economic structures within the former princely states. It focuses on the different internal governments within the states, the role of native and 'foreign' administrators, growing bureaucratization, and the modernizing policies of the princes under British pressure from the 1860s to the 1940s (p.170). Ramusack examines those states which were deemed to be 'progressive', the role of royal women as mothers and wives in the power politics of the court, and economic development in the forms of agriculture, irrigation, railways, industrialization and ports. In particular, she analyzes three distinct states in various regions - the coastal state of Travancore, the southern peninsula of Mysore, and the flat lands of Baroda - which created centralized, bureaucratized governments that emphasized literacy, equal employment and changes in land revenue rates (p. 204).

Chapter 7 discusses society and politics within the princely states. Ramusack begins her analysis with an examination of the territorial boundaries and populations of the states, popular political activities within states, the role of the Indian National Congress and nationalism, political mobilization and communal organizations within the states. Urban educated elites have dominated the story of political activity in the princely states, as there is a greater number of sources available for their study. However, Ramusack suggests that such elite groups were unable to harness mass bases (p. 242). She also argues that the forging of communal identities on religious lines within princely India was markedly different from the construction of such movements in British India (p. 243). In kingdoms where the majority of subjects had a religion that diverged from that of the prince, patronage of religious organizations and popular political activity could become communal in nature, most notably in Kashmir and Hyderabad (p. 244).

In her final chapter, Ramusack critiques the last phase of colonial rule for the princes: their decision whether to enter a federation or to become integrated within the newly formed democratic nations of South Asia. Her analysis reveals the diffuse and fragmented relationships among the princes. Due to the fact that the princes did not have experience in collective negotiations, they were unable to maintain a united front in the intense bargaining period from 1945-8, when the integration of the princely states was being considered. Ultimately, the British government in its exit from India devalued the political significance of the Indian princes in the new independent countries of India and Pakistan.

The Indian Princes and their States is a long overdue treatment of princely India during the colonial period. Ramusack's panoramic lens provides a broad history of her subject from the 18th to the 21st centuries. As she herself highlights, the study of princely India has largely been marginalized in the last fifty or so years since India's independence. A

text of such encyclopedic ambitions has no forerunners of similar breadth or authority. It is particularly illuminating that Cambridge University Press has chosen to publish it as part of its new Cambridge History of India series. The series aims to address various prominent periods of South Asian history, largely broken down into 'The Mughals and their contemporaries', 'Indian states and the transition to colonialism', 'The Indian Empire and the beginnings of modern society', and 'The evolution of contemporary South Asia'. The fact that Ramusack's work on princely India has been placed within such a canonical series suggests that the princes are no longer sidelined, but will possibly occupy a more central place in the study of Indian politics and history.

Having devoted her scholarly life to the study of princely India, Ramusack was an appropriate choice for the writing of this definitive volume. Her research is rich, interweaving primary literary and oral sources, colonial and postcolonial histories, archival photographs, paintings, maps, and references to literature, film and music. Her prose is readable; her language concise and clear. Furthermore, there is a sense of this scholar's deep interest in her topic.

Nonetheless, some critical observations ought to be made. As Ramusack herself notes, her work is limited due to the constraints of space and available sources. For this reason, the study of princely India warrants further investigation. While she writes in various chapters on certain elements of female rulership and the role of queens and princesses, her work is largely centred on male leaders. She alludes to dynastic marriage, the role of women in succession disputes and negative attitudes towards miscegenation, but does not relate such findings to broader investigations of the nature of female governance or gender relations in princely states. As she herself admits, 'the agency of elite and non-elite women in princely states during the colonial era begs for further analysis' (p. 182).

There is much material on the Indian princes that has not been brought out of the archive. This book should serve as a catalyst for further scholarship and more generally as an analysis of British indirect rule and indigenous forms of kingship. It is a vital resource on an area of Indian history that has often been neglected.

Christ Church, Oxford

ANGMA JHALA