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## Turning Princes into Subjects

ROB JENKINS

*The Princes of India and the Endgame of Empire, 1917–1947* by Ian Copland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 302 pp., \$59.95).

*Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity* by Shail Mayaram (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 298 pp., \$32).

*Colonial Hegemony and Popular Response: Princes, Peasants, and Paramount Power* by Hira Singh (London: Sage Publications, 1998, 274 pp., \$44.95).

Even historians who seek to peel back the veil of exotica which surrounds India's pre-Independence 'native princes' cannot, it seems, resist recounting some of the more lurid legends. They are revealed tastefully, of course, with the most serious of scholarly intent: to establish how deep-rooted is the orientalist construction of the degenerate Asian monarch, before proceeding to demolish the myth. And yet one cannot help but be suspicious, even when such gossip is passed on in the line of duty, as it were. Like today's 'quality' newspapers recycling tabloid rumour in the guise of high-minded 'media analysis', orientalism's critics often cite their sources, and dish the dirt, with unseemly relish. When historians as different as Ian Copland, who dissects the diplomacy of decolonisation, and Shail Mayaram, who deconstructs the interrelation of state and identity formation in princely India, both manage to include details of the Maharaja of Alwar's appetite for pretty young boys, or how he punished a losing racehorse by setting it ablaze, it reinforces the impression that the urge to

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reveal the excesses of such larger-than-life figures is pretty natural. (I just did it myself, didn't I?) It also implies that this particular form of orientalism is not quite the vice it is made out to be.

Nevertheless, the books by Copland and Mayaram – and a third, by Hira Singh, which deals with changing agrarian relations in Rajasthan under the *rajās* – begin from the valid premise that princely India has not received nearly the degree of historical study it deserves. 'British India' was of course much larger, and had the historical advantage of having been home not only to the dominant colonial power, but also to what Eric Hobsbawm has called the 'winners of history', in this case the Indian nationalist movement. But, as all three books remind us, 'Indian India' contained roughly 40 per cent of the imperial landmass and over a quarter of its population. After the Second World War, rulers like the Nizam of Hyderabad controlled budgets almost as large as Belgium's. All three books declare an intention to treat the princes themselves as active subjects, rather than passive objects, of history. Ian Copland agrees wholeheartedly with the former Maharaja of Dhrangadhra's complaint that the princes were being airbrushed from history. 'The Maharajas', he tells us, 'have been maligned and marginalised by the historical profession to an absurd degree' (p.8). Characteristically, it is Hira Singh who puts this point most forcefully in his stated desire to break with the 'colonial mode of historiography', in which British India and British influence on Indian India are privileged. No less guilty of this crime, he adds, are the radical scholars associated with 'subaltern studies', a project the Indian sociologist André Béteille has called 'that strange blend of intellectualism and populism'.

Singh's noble but perhaps doomed aspiration is to reintegrate the princely states 'into the mainstream of historiography of colonial India' (p.22). Unfortunately, he wants to transport us back to princely India in order to revisit somewhat tiresome debates surrounding the encounter between capitalist and pre-capitalist 'modes of production'. Whether princely India can be classified as feudal or not is, I suppose, an important question with a wide range of implications for other carefully devised historical arguments. But taxonomical debates of this type tend to try the patience of those of us not preoccupied with them. We innocent bystanders must endure the rhetorical fallout from decades-old grudges among competing 'schools' that have turned increasingly inward-looking.

Fortunately, Singh is eclectic and ambitious enough to place his evidence in the service of other intellectual causes as well. His main point, if his wide-ranging book can be said to have one, is that not only did princes possess agency; in fact, they had enough clout to force India's newest

imperial ruler to share power with them. They were a site of resistance as well, obviously, as collaboration. The term 'indirect rule', he argues, has not been able to capture an essential fact: that 'the historic alliance between the colonial state and landed aristocracy in India was a compromise which the colonial state, given its vulnerabilities, was forced to accept in the face of resistance by the latter' (p.36). Though he over-states his case, Singh is on to something. The impression obtained from standard accounts is that while the East India Company may in the early years have needed certain rulers to support its balance-of-power diplomacy, the post-1857 era of crown rule kept the Maharajas 'in power' out of *noblesse oblige*, and in order to provide a veneer of legitimacy to Britain's subcontinental suzerainty. The dominant image is of colonial officials as museum curators, maintaining the princes as curiosities, as hunting buddies for visiting lords and ladies, and most of all as colourful props in the pageant of imperial display.

Singh, however, sees the drama being played out elsewhere: namely, in the relations between aristocratic landlords and their peasants. The crucial dynamic at work, he argues, was the gradual distancing of the *Thikanedar* nobility – the princes' feudatories – from those over whom they ruled. Thanks to the peace which prevailed between rival princes once British overlordship had imposed order, their vassals were divested of most of their functions, military and juridical. They became, in Singh's view, a kind of superfluous class. As if to confirm the British perception of them as 'parasites', the non-princely aristocracy drifted towards self-parody. It is from their ranks, not from among the princes, that the most credible tales of decadence and dissolution are drawn by both Indian and Western scholars. Just as the *rajās* became increasingly preoccupied with their ceremonial role at court in Delhi and London, the *Thikanedars* diverted their energies towards the *darbars*, or princely courts. Turning their backs on events on the farm, so to speak, many spent far more time at their newly renovated townhouses in the state capitals. This placed them at a greater cultural as well as physical remove from the peasantry. The result was a series of increasingly assertive peasant uprisings that undermined the prestige of both the princes and their vassals.

There is much to commend Singh's emphasis on agrarian relations within the princely domains. But, as is often the case, he cannot resist stretching his argument beyond credulity. On the crucial question of imperialism's consequences his logic just does not add up: if Britain's alliances with the princes could indeed be considered 'accommodations' between colonial power and 'pre-capitalist' structures, and if these did in fact result in social contradictions which fuelled conflict in the countryside,

then one would naturally expect peasant movements to have been strongest in princely India. They were not. It is a question that Singh appears not to have considered at all.

Another even more important question he neglects is one that Shail Mayaram has raised: what if the princely states were not simply feudal? She wisely side-steps the elaborate scholarly minefield of the 'feudal or not feudal' debate, and proceeds directly to outlining her argument, which is that the two princely realms she examined, Alwar and Bharatpur (both in Rajasthan), were by the early twentieth century well on their way to becoming a 'variant' of the modern state. Mayaram has thus fallen from the 'modes of production' frying pan into the 'what constitutes the modern state' fire. Again, prudently, she refuses to engage with the arcane details of this debate.

Instead, Mayaram constructs a compelling case for viewing Alwar under Jai Singh and Bharatpur under Kishan Singh as political entities 'where the sovereign was the sole source of law and exercised a monopoly over the means of violence' (p.55) – or was at least moving swiftly in that direction. They did this by extending monarchical sovereignty over juridical affairs; by restricting the role of local, community-specific customary law; by usurping control over land revenue and natural resources; and, above all, by seeking to extend the state's dominion over collective memory, and thus the categories of identity. Through the promulgation of laws and the co-optation of emergent social and economic elites, these and many other domains fell under the exclusive jurisdiction of the princes and their impressively able ministers. In short, they began to look a lot like bureaucratic (if not completely rational) states.

Even more controversially, Mayaram argues that Jai Singh was animated in these and other state-building initiatives, such as social and religious reform, by a form of proto-nationalism. Most observers have failed to see this, she maintains, because they have been prejudiced by colonial history, which portrayed his aloof behaviour towards British officials as, at best, wounded regal pride, and, at worst, a kind of madness stemming from his lascivious lifestyle. Mayaram also maintains that nationalist historiography, having constructed a binary opposition between colonial collaborators and freedom fighters, has obscured the nationalist roots of Jai Singh's enormous popularity during his latter years in power: 'The basis of his kingly authority no longer derived exclusively from sacrifice, descent, or the gift. His legitimation came instead from the nationalist moral renewal he authorised and the national community he helped to produce' (p.54).

Mayaram is not unnecessarily romantic about this process. One of nationalist state-building's ill-effects is in fact the main subject of her book:

how state imperatives forced the fluid identity of the Meo people into the 'Muslim' camp. 'There was', Mayaram argues, 'no space for liminality, for communities that were in between, and for Meo-ness' (p.273). Casualties of colonialist-inspired modernisation, the Meos had for centuries occupied an indeterminate middle-ground, a hybrid community sharing Muslim and Hindu beliefs and practices. Mayaram spends most of two extremely interesting chapters in a painstaking analysis of the way in which different actors 'constructed' the Meo revolt of the 1930s. She compares the official accounts of the Alwar state and the colonial government with the popular narratives inscribed in the Meo oral tradition. This involved her in intensive fieldwork with members of the community, which she has clearly accomplished with a great deal of ingenuity, as well as in archival research of striking originality, involving analysis of everything from agricultural records to official correspondence – all grounded in a sensitive reading of the theoretical literature.

Such anthropological concerns do not enter Ian Copland's conceptual radar. Unabashedly analysing historic events through the thoughts and deeds of 'great men', his book appears the most traditional of the three. Its subject – the transfer of power – is notoriously prone to weighty scholarly pronouncements which seem rather beside the point. But there is also a sense in which Copland's account of princely behaviour is the most radical. Like Singh and Mayaram, he is concerned to invest the princes with agency. But he also appears to want to make them human. So while Singh and Mayaram give the princely *states* their due – the former in terms of feudal relations, the latter with respect to official policy and ritual – Copland's subject is the princes *themselves*: their ambivalences, their relations with one another, their personal shortcomings. He also treats far more of them – the two dozen or so from across India who 'mattered' to the 'endgame of empire' – than either Singh, who confines himself to Rajasthan's princes, or Mayaram, who deals with just two of these.

What puzzles Copland is the rapid extinction of these political dinosaurs. One minute they were thriving, the next vanished, 'integrated' into the post-colonial dispensation. He rightly chides historians of decolonisation who 'read history backward', in effect assuming with the benefit of hindsight that the princes were doomed by forces beyond their control. Copland's argument, which he sets atop a mountain of archival evidence, is that the princes doomed themselves with strategic blunders as much as anything else. Things did not have to turn out as they did. They had options. From time to time, the princes were presented with potentially workable proposals – such as the plan for confederation floated by the

colonial government in the 1930s – and each time they blew it. It was certainly not the case that the movement towards democracy swept inexorably over them. Monarchs in Malaysia and elsewhere negotiated better deals for themselves. India's princes were divided amongst themselves, and above all overly confident about the loyalty of their British patrons.

As a study of strategic choice, written in plain English and with a minimum of distracting scholarly apparatus, Copland's book succeeds admirably in forcing us to reassess our notions of the possible. Copland's approach – with its large 'sample-size' – also has the great advantage of revealing something of the diversity among India's princely rulers. And by casting his analytical eye over the interactions among the leading princes, we get a glimpse of how this very diversity helped to undermine the prospects for collective action among this endangered species, even as their last hopes for retaining their perquisites and autonomy were being fatally dashed. That the 'pure-Kshatriya' Rajput Maharajas looked down on what they saw as the less-exalted origins of the Maratha rulers or the Jat-Sikh princes of Punjab was not without practical implications. Forging a common response to trespasses upon their rights proved extremely difficult under such circumstances.

What is striking about reading each of these books alongside the others is not so much their somewhat obvious differences, but the many things they have in common. Mayaram, for instance, has a dig at 'peasant studies' – Hira Singh's field, though he is a bit of an apostate – for seeing all peasant radicalism in terms of anti-feudal struggles. And yet, like Singh, she is concerned to up-end the scholarly orthodoxy, in which factors external to the princely states (particularly the various nationalist movements in British India) are given primacy in explaining the predispositions of actors within the princely states. The standard historical accounts are wrong, she argues, to view the influence of Islamic revival movements elsewhere in India as the driving force – in effect, the decisive cause – explaining the emergence of the Meo revolt. Both her archival work and the oral testimonies she elicited furnish overwhelming evidence that local sources of resistance predated whatever influence the *Tabligh* (Faith) movement might ultimately have had. To give primacy to the *Tabligh* movement is to buy into the discourse of the princely state, which sought actively to cast the Meos' efforts at resistance as both communally tinged and incited from without. Mayaram argues for an alternative view: 'Islamization in the rural areas,

then, does not precede agrarian unrest as much as being the consequence of state policy' (p.95).

Indeed, it is Mayaram's strength in Singh's field, the analysis of historical sources of economic data, that allows her to make the case for viewing the material position of the Meos as a factor of greater importance. Unfortunately, she also at times shares Singh's shortcomings, particularly the impulse to press her case beyond what her own facts seem to warrant. For instance, she uses as evidence for her assertion that one episode in the Meo revolt was not 'a communal conflict' the fact that 'the Muslim Qazi who accompanies the state party [of ruthless tax-collecting officials] is also the object of the Meos' anger' (p.100). She also cites in this connection the fact that the Meos were not appeased when even a 'fellow Muslim' was appointed to a commission on agrarian grievances. Simply because Meos understood that some Muslims could be bought off by the state does not mean that their movement was not inspired, at least in part, by religious passion. Today's Indian Muslims have not been won over by the BJP's efforts to showcase a few Muslim tokens, just as BJP leaders invoke the 'pandering' of Hindu politicians to Muslim 'vote banks' – a classic allegation of selling out – to build support.

Copland, too, has a few preoccupations and perspectives in common with Mayaram. This is not to ignore their considerable differences – which come out strongly, for instance, when we consider Copland's focus on the mercenary nature of many politico-administrative functionaries in princely India. These were 'outsiders', like the journeyman chief minister Mirza Ismail, whose prominent role highlights the fact that while some key princes were indeed constructing states, and even nationalisms, they were not wedding the two in the form of nation-states, where territorially defined origins would determine eligibility for political inclusion. And yet, in another sense, it is possible to discern Copland engaging in something quite similar to Mayaram's form of analysis. In developing a composite portrait of the 'princely culture' within which the elite rulers operated, he is excavating a lost community bounded by rituals, tradition and, at least to some degree, a common set of narratives which reveal their changing self-perceptions. These were inscribed in the practices associated with the Chamber of Princes as well as in the codes of conduct which regulated their social interactions.

Without stretching the analogy too far, it is nevertheless possible to see parallels between these two otherwise very different books. The princes were not subalterns, as Hira Singh would have us believe, but their subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the Imperial order had effects on their shared

community which might have gone unnoticed had not Copland drawn our attention to the finer points of their deliberations. As important as what Copland's account shares with Mayaram's is the way in which they complement one another. Indeed, apart from the excesses of the flesh, the Jai Singh in Copland's book often comes across as a different man completely from the one we find in Mayaram's. Not only were his public and private worlds distinctly different, but, as with most politicians, so were his two public personas – the one adopted within his realm, and the one projected in the 'international' arena.

Is there anything which ties all three books together apart from their desire to resurrect the serious study of Indian India? Perhaps. There is, first of all, an aversion to the positions staked out by Nicholas Dirks in his classic work, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*.<sup>1</sup> Mayaram is the most sympathetic of the three, praising Dirks for his critique of Dumont. She is nevertheless clear that Dirks' theory, based on a south Indian case study, is of limited wider applicability. She is also critical of his failure to convey a 'sense of the varying perceptions of sovereignty by those subject to' the sometimes conflicting claims of caste and temporal politics (p.273). Singh is far more dismissive, seeing Dirks as the prime exemplar of the 'colonial mode of historiography' (pp.27–34). Copland agrees, insisting that the princely states were more than 'simply Geertzian theatre-states – hollow crowns in Nicholas Dirks' crisp but overly dramatic phrase' (p.33).

And yet, Copland, Singh and Mayaram are perhaps united most of all in the failure of each to address a serious logical contradiction common to all three books. While stressing the princes' agency, and seeking to pursue the notion that colonial influence was not decisive in the encounter between princely and British India, all three nevertheless explain the downfall of the monarchies with reference to colonial intervention. They all become structuralists in the end. Despite his emphasis on the princes' strategic lapses, Copland concludes, as indeed he must, that 'thirty years of constant imperial surveillance and pressure had sapped much of the energy, much of the *raison d'être*, from the old *darbari* system' (p.25). And this after having excoriated James Manor for his assertion that 'by the mid-1930s, the princely order was doomed' (p.13).<sup>2</sup> Hira Singh holds the colonial imposition similarly accountable. His central argument, after all, is that by disrupting the reciprocal relationship between prince and vassal British paramountcy fuelled tensions between landlord and peasant, thereby unleashing forms of protest that ultimately proved critical in the princes' downfall.

Mayaram's position is the most complicated. She maintains that what undid the princes – in the cases of Alwar and Bharatpur, at least – was the hybrid form that historical circumstance and personal inclination had caused their rule to take: 'the Alwar and Bharatpur monarchs ... failed to realise that they articulated an inherently unstable political imaginary – the princely state could never be the modern nation state that Indian nationalism aspired to become' (p.270). What Mayaram studiously plays down throughout her otherwise fascinating book is the degree of colonial influence on the state forms these princes adopted (and adapted). Mayaram is right to insist that much of what passed for indigenous kingship were 'invented traditions', contrived to suit the outsiders' tastes and compensate for the princes' wounded egos. But she is wrong not to acknowledge that colonial intervention was largely responsible for half of the rickety 'political imaginary' which ultimately came collapsing down around the princes: that is, much of the conceptual basis underlying nationalism. Mayaram unconvincingly claims that many of the reforms under way in Alwar and Bharatpur pre-dated British influence. Some did, but not the decisive ones.

Moreover, Mayaram is happy to blame British ideas for the excesses of the resultant policies, such as absurdly inflexible systems of land taxation. But in those instances where colonial officials cautioned leniency and restraint, and Jai Singh and his men refused their advice, Mayaram fails to mention the potential implications for her larger argument. Indeed, both the Senior Civil Officer and the General Officer Commanding at the time of the tax revolts suggested, in the quotation she reproduces, 'wholesale reforms in the system of taxation throughout the state' (p.108). Moreover, even on the more serious charge of having inherited from the imperial mindset the habit of casting conflicts and riots as essentially inter-religious, Mayaram's own evidence places her on shaky ground. The Political Secretary had wired to his superiors a message indicating that the 'Troubles in Alwar are of two categories: Moslem and agrarian, which though interconnected through events and propaganda are in reality distinct' (p.109). These sorts of apparent inconsistencies need not fatally undermine the book's main theses, but they raise enough doubts in the minds of even a non-specialist reader to require additional work on the author's part to put them to rest.

There are even times when Mayaram appears to be denying the Meos their agency as well, at the very least implying a failure to apprehend that it was largely the influence of the colonial state which led Jai Singh's administration to turn against them. 'The Meo revolt', she argues, 'in a mimetic exercise involving some historical and cultural amnesia [!],

accepted the British as "neutral" arbiters' (p.82). Did somebody say false consciousness?

No matter. Mayaram's intellectual energies have produced a work of great elegance. Indeed, all three books are worthwhile forays into intellectual and ideological thickets, allowing the rest of us to gain a better view of the uncertain terrain. Like much contemporary scholarship, however, these three works, in their different ways, underscore the difficulty of restoring agency to the colonised while recognising how indebted their efforts at resistance were to the thoughts and imperatives of the colonisers.

#### NOTES

1. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
2. James Manor, 'The Demise of the Princely Order: A Reassessment', in R. Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).