

## **Princely states in colonial India: A historiographical analysis of the trends in modern Indian historical writings**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Princely India under the native Indian princes in the colonial period has mostly been neglected in the dominant narratives of modern Indian history. This marginalization was chiefly due to historical and historiographical reasons. These princely realms have often been homogenized and dismissed. While traversing the historiographical trajectory of the theme, the paper attempts to examine the new emerging perceptions and trends with specific reference to the colonial imprints on Rajputana native states in general and Jaipur princely state in particular. The recent revisionist scholarship has provided them an effectual restoration as themes of genuine academic and scholarly pursuits in the modern Indian historiography. The present paper is in line with the recent revisionist scholarship. The differences in the policies and impact between the direct and the indirect rule of the British explicate the need to treat the princely or native states as a substantially significant subjects of study. The attention on regional history is crucial in developing comprehensive history and the paper also attempts to throw light on this aspect.

**Key Words :** Princely States, Colonial India, Trends in Indian Historiography, Regional History

### **INTRODUCTION**

Princely India or Indian India, constituting some six hundred odd states was that part of colonial India, which was under the suzerainty of native ruling princes. These princely realms have often been homogenized and dismissed as 'quaint anachronistic spaces', broadly painted with a single brush of 'Oriental Despotism'. They have largely remained on the margins of the dominant narratives of modern Indian history. It is well evident from the absence of any significant work on the Princes and Princely states until 1970s. Few works are noteworthy in bringing the subject to the centre stage of research pursuits. Such as Ian Copland's *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire 1917-1947*<sup>1</sup> have added a new dimension to the history of late colonial India, and has implications for the wider history of the twentieth-century British Empire. Copland's comprehensive

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1. Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire 1917-1947*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

and fascinating study of the role played by the Indian princes, the maharajas and nawabs of South Asia, in the devolution of British colonial power was long overdue. By rehabilitating the princes as subjects of serious historical study, the author argues that, far from being puppets under the control of the British, they were in fact noteworthy players on the Indian political stage. S. R. Ashton's *British Policy Towards the Indian States (1905-1939)*<sup>2</sup> brings in the emphasis on the governmental relation, both provincial and central, with the princes. The other potential approaches in the study were the relationship with Congress and that of the alliance between the princes and some Conservatives in Britain. 1939 has been marked as the conclusion of the study, indicates the termination of the negotiation aimed at creating the federation with the princes, envisaged in the 1935 India Act. Ashton builds up the dynamics between princes and the other elements drawing skilfully with the aid of wide range of sources as the private collections in the India Office Records and the official material.

Further, B. N. Ramusack's *The Princes of India in the Twilight of the Empires: Dissolution of a Patron Client System (1914-1939)*<sup>3</sup> argues that the British did not create the princes. On the contrary, many were consummate politicians who exercised considerable degrees of autonomy until the disintegration of the princely states after independence. The book is noteworthy in investigating the political developments in the princely states and the shifting relationships between the princes and the British. It represents a major contribution, both to British imperial history in its analysis of the theory and practice of indirect rule, and to modern South Asian history, as a portrait of the princes as politician. Also, the well researched writings on the theme as Robin Jeffrey (ed.)'s *People, Princes and Paramount Power*<sup>4</sup>, Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati (ed.)'s *India's Princely States (People, Princes and Colonialism)*<sup>5</sup>, Barbara N. Ramusack's *The Indian Princes and Their States*<sup>6</sup>, etc. have supplemented eruditely in the exploration of the subject and the sources.

This recent revisionist scholarship has provided them an effectual restoration as themes of genuine academic and scholarly pursuits<sup>7</sup> in the colonial Indian historiography. These revisionist scholars, however, have mostly focussed and limited their study to 'the realm of high politics' at the all-India level, dealing with 'princely India as a compartmentalized unity', a 'darbari oligarchy',

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2. S. R. Ashton, *British Policy Towards the Indian States (1905-1939)*, Curzon Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, London, 1982.
  3. B. N. Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of the Empires: Dissolution of a Patron Client System (1914-1939)*, Columbus OH, 1978
  4. Robin Jeffrey(ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1978
  5. Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati (ed.), *India's Princely States(People, Princes and Colonialism)*, Routledge Studies in Modern History of Asia, 2007
  6. Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States:3(The New Cambridge History of India)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004
  7. Works as Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire 1917-1947*, Cambridge, 1997; S. R. Ashton, *British Policy Towards the Indian States (1905-1939)*, London, 1982; B. N. Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of the Empires: Dissolution of a Patron Client System (1914-1939)*, Columbus OH, 1978; Robin Jeffrey(ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978; Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati (ed.), *India's Princely States(People, Princes and Colonialism)*, Routledge Studies in Modern History of Asia, 2007, etc.

claiming that ‘everyone else more or less ‘fell in’ with what this group decided.’<sup>8</sup> Barring few works, the individual cases and regions have not received separate treatment, in the supposition of their homogenized response to the situation. Hence, a historiographical hiatus remains with regard to the functioning and dynamics of different elements of the societal fabric of these states.

The present paper is in line with the recent revisionist scholarship that has presented the princely states as crucial and notable arenas in modern Indian historiography. The attempt is to explore and position these states as spheres of serious historical analysis, and to gauge the influences of the British manoeuvrings in the changing scenario at the regional level. These domains were not compartmentalized static units of indigenous rule. The discrepancies in the policies and impact between the direct and the indirect rule of the British explicate the need to treat the princely or native states as a substantially significant subject of study.<sup>9</sup> The analysis of the impact of the colonial state on the social apparatus of the princely states is an essential component for a holistic understanding of this particular area of history.

Regional history is an emerging and important dimension in comprehensive historiographical exploration of the subject. Histories of regions have often been stereotyped, influenced and inspired by the imperialist and nationalist constructs. The study on region and regionalism came to forefront with the advanced research of scholars as Bernard Cohn.<sup>10</sup> The need is to present dynamics and process of historical change to provide fresh insights into the history of regions. Regional focus opens up various questions in Indian history. It brings home the uneven nature of historical development in the subcontinent, both in terms of the sequence of the development of historical stages and chronology of the emergence of regions. Regions in India have identifiable languages, coterminous with region-specific caste-class situations and cultural boundaries. It creates conditions for latent sub-nationalism which have the potentialities of becoming manifest. Such tendencies have been historically contained by the common resistance to the British domination and the experience of and participation in the national movement.<sup>11</sup> Here, the focus is on the princely states of Rajasthan, while dealing with the princely states as a whole. The study shows how different the histories of different regions are from the historical developments taking place in the Indian heartland. Rajasthan was not an insulated area but however one can concur that its social and economic dynamics have still retained a regional flavour. This could be grasped with reference to its geography and the historical specificities as interactions with the British power in the region. Distinctly, the work in a way underlines the need for more regional studies which will help us in appreciating and addressing the complexities of the Indian nation

Interestingly, with regard to the princely states of Rajputana which continued to be a

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8. Manu Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres :Princes, Education and Empires in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.21
  9. Lakshmi Iyer, Direct versus Indirect Colonial Rule in India: Long-term Consequences, April 2009; Abhijit Banerjee, Lakshmi Iyer, Rohini Somanathan, ‘History, Social Divisions, and Public Goods in Rural India’, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Vol. 3, No. 2/3, Papers and Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Congress of the European Economic Association (Apr. -May, 2005), pp. 639-647
  10. Bernard S. Cohn, ‘Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History and Society’, *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987
  11. Gayatri Bhagwat Sahu, ‘Regions in Indian History’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4 (Mar. - Apr., 1992), pp. 83-88.

concentrated corner of native rule, even during the period of colonial dominance. They present an intriguingly fascinating case of culture, tradition, and history. Though they shared certain common cultural norms and facets; it would be overlooking the rich specificities underlying this perceptible homogeneity, if their past would be treated as one. The historiographical light thrown on the region varies widely. The modern study of the region was comprehensively initiated by James Tod through his research work, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. The notable works<sup>12</sup> such as Karni Singh's *The Relations of the House of Bikaner with the Central Powers (1465-1949)*, A.C. Banerjee's *The Rajput States and the East India Company(1803-1857)*, Sukumar Bhattacharya's *The Rajput States and the East India Company: From the Close of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to 1820*, Ian Copland's *The British Raj and the Indian Princes :Paramountcy in Western India, 1857-1930*, deal with Rajputana and its interface with the British power. They put forth the nuances pertaining to the inception of the British alliances with the princely states. They largely focus on the political currents relating to treaties, tributes, and power politics. With regard to the colonial interaction, the organizational framework developed by the British for the dealings with the native powers and maintaining their influence in the region has been well recounted.<sup>13</sup> The academic endeavours concerning the colonial impact on the society have been primarily confined to the peasant and tribal movements in the region.<sup>14</sup> Their emphasis has been on the individual movements and a sociological perspective on the theme. More dimensions need to be explored for a fuller treatment of the theme.

To bring out the regional nuances on the subject, the present study take up the case of the Jaipur state and the neighbouring areas. A variety of works<sup>15</sup> have documented the history of Jaipur region and its involvement with the British. Jadunath Sarkar's *History of Jaipur*<sup>16</sup> was commissioned by Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II, the last ruler of the erstwhile Jaipur state. This meticulous narrative of the *Kachhwa* rulers of Jaipur presents a compelling history of the Jaipur dynasty. Being an official history the focus of the work is on the Jaipur rulers. Further, Robert Stern's *The Cat and the Lion: Jaipur State in the British Raj*<sup>17</sup> is an important and interesting work covering the period commencing from the British alliance with the Jaipur State in the early

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12. Karni Singh, *The Relations of the House of Bikaner with the Central Powers (1465-1949)*, New Delhi, 1974; A.C. Banerjee, *The Rajput States and the East India Company(1803-1857)*, Calcutta, 1951; Sukumar Bhattacharya, *The Rajput States and the East India Company: From the Close of the 18th Century to 1820*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972; Ian Copland, *The British Raj and the Indian Princes :Paramountcy in Western India, 1857-1930*, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1982
  13. V.K. Vashishtha, *Rajputana Agency 1832-1852*, Jaipur: Aalekh Publishers, 1978.
  14. V.K. Vashishtha, *Bhagat Movement, Study of Cultural Transformation of the Bhils of Southern Rajasthan*, Jaipur, 1997; K.L. Sharma, *Rural Society in India*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1997; Pema Ram, *Agrarian Movement in Rajasthan, 1913-1947 A.D.*, Jaipur: Panchsheel Prakashan, 1986; Brij Kishore Sharma, *Peasant Movements in Rajasthan, 1920-1947*, Jaipur: Pointer Publishers, 1990; Ram Pande, *Agrarian Movement in Rajasthan*, Delhi :University Publishers, 1974
  15. Futeh Singh Chanpawat, *A Brief History of Jeypore, Agra*, 1899; H. C. Batra, *The Relations of Jaipur State with the East India Company(1803-1858)*, Delhi, 1958; Ashim Kumar Roy, *History of the Jaipur City*, Delhi :Manohar, 1978; Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of Jaipur: c 1503- 1938*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984; Robert W. Stern, *The Cat and the Lion: Jaipur State in the British Raj*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1988.
  16. Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of Jaipur: c 1503- 1938*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984
  17. Robert W. Stern, *The Cat and the Lion: Jaipur State in the British Raj*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1988.

nineteenth century till independence. Its focus remains on the imperial interface with regard to the Jaipur government and the rulers. The area relating to the British impression on the socio-economic arena and rural society is not the major concern of this work.

The impact of colonial rule in the princely states was not just confined to the political circles of the ruling elites, or pruning of the princely powers. It penetrated deep, affecting various sections and aspects of the society. A wider perspective of the British influence is required to develop a wholesome image. The imperial imprints were most evidently perceived and endured by the most vulnerable groups of the society. The rural society provides a panoramic view of the changes in all dimensions which evolved with the advent of the British. The analysis with region specificities is crucial for a comprehensive examination.

Hence, the attempt should be to comprehend and assess the so called colonial '*indirect*' rule in the princely states, which they controlled and directed employing various measures and tools to exert their dominance. The historical essence comprehensively gauging the imperial imprints also need to focus on the socio-economic dimensions of the rural society. The British land revenue settlements were one of the decisive instruments used by the British to penetrate and exercise influence in these states, especially as they came under the regency administration. The consequential impact of the new land revenue arrangements unravel the curious presence of the British domain in the princely spheres of Rajputana. The countryside experienced the true taste of the colonial dynamics. The movement of the natives and the 'recalcitrant' tribes came under strict surveillance. The colonial state consolidating its power in the nineteenth century brought in several discourses and ideological weapons to control the indigenous groups threatening their presence. Such exploration of imperial thought and practice will inevitably require a broader perspective in our historical writings. The historiographical trends in the subject initiated have advanced and enhanced the area in its historical research but these neglected corners need more exploration on its theme and sources.

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