



Princely States and the Making of Modern India

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Introduction

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Many decades of sustained scholarly works have brought the princely states of British India from the margins to the centre of new scholarship on modern India. Princely states are no longer the 'other' of British India in the new historiography of colonial India. From the side-lines, they have now come to occupy an important place in the new writings on the making of modern Indian history.

There are still shortcomings in the prolific scholarship on princely states, with most of the works focusing on prominent 'model' princely states. The issues they tackle are still limited within the 'model' princely ruler and state framework and needs to be revisited and expanded. We need to diversify princely states historiography to include lesser studied smaller states or chiefdoms especially in north-east India. Further, we also need to trace interconnections and comparisons between princely states and British India, and even the wider terrain internationally and globally. Finally, we need to study the legacy of princely India in the making of colonial and post-colonial modern India. This will allow us to debate the different routes and models of modernity and politics experimented in princely states as important resources and constituent elements in the making of post-colonial modernity and politics in India.

This special issue addresses these underexplored aspects and lacuna in existing historiography by not just including major and model princely states like Baroda, but also studying them comparatively with smaller



and understudied princely states like Kullu, chiefdoms in north-east India like Khasi-Jaintia, and Jammu & Kashmir. While emphasising the local context, we also aim to promote and work with the framework of the connected princely state histories with colonial and post-colonial Indian history as well as the wider global history. We have identified three spheres of connected histories that we wish to focus on and explore within the framework in this special issue.

Between local and global: legal and intellectual histories of princely sovereignty

Princely state historiography is moving from the focus on hegemonic colonial paramountcy to the exploration of princely sovereignty. The recent works of Manu Bhagavan, Eric Beverley, and Milinda Banerjee are crucial in terms of the conceptualisation of discourses and practices of 'sovereign spheres' and 'minor sovereignty' within the larger historiography of sovereignty in India under colonialism (Bhagavan 2003; Beverley 2015; Banerjee 2018). However, beyond the conceptual and discursive constitution of sovereignty in princely India, it is equally important to connect it with colonial discourse and practices of paramountcy. This requires sustained attention to trace pre-colonial to the colonial reconfiguration of sovereignty and law.

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The connection between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial legality and articulation of sovereignty appears centrally in the article by Sujata Chaudhary in her study of princes and the legal administration of temples in the erstwhile princely state of Kullu and Travancore. As Chaudhary shows through comparative study of north and southern princely states there are similarities and differences. Legal debates about the management of religious institutions began in princely India and had implications for colonial and post-colonial India. Her article allows us to think about the long history of *bureaucratisation* and *judicialisation* of religious matters and institutions in which princely states were central. Surprisingly, they have remained marginal in the existing historiography of colonial and post-colonial India. This also helps us put in perspective some of the contentious land and endowment legal issues about temples, shrines, and mosques in contemporary India.

As evident the political and administrative histories of princely states have come a long way from being the colonial officials' accounts of treaties signed and laws passed. They need to be studied both discursively and institutionally in the wider connected histories of modern processes of bureaucratisation and administrative reforms in princely India.

However, we still know and engage very little with the role of princely administrators, lawyers, and politicians in the making of national and



international politics, law, and authority. They were important actors for the emergence of political actors in British India, whether it was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mohammed Ali, Syed Ross Masood, or other major political actors they relied on for financial and moral support. The role of the Maharaja of Baroda has been examined, but we need more studies particularly on the complicated terrain of Muslim politics and its complex relationship with Muslim princely rulers.

The emergence of different scales of analysis on princely states is perhaps the most productive new direction in princely state historiography. From local studies to situating them in the development of regional identity, particularly in Kashmir, Hyderabad, and north-eastern states, has been noticed for a while, but focused attention to local history is being paid now. However, the princely state perspective is equally valuable and necessary in understanding debates on nature of colonialism, para-colonialism, nation formation, federal structure, international connections, and global history. This was very much part of now-ignored administrative and political histories. However, they have recently re-emerged under the new legal history and international relations framework.

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The global intellectual history approach can also provide new insights into these connected histories. Particularly the lack of biographical works not just on princes and princesses, which is an interesting and important field in its own right, but also on important officials who shaped the administration of these states. Intellectual biographies of figures like Syed Ross Masood in Hyderabad, Bashir Hussain Zaidi in Rampur, and Ramaswami Aiyar in Travancore will contribute much to our understanding of not only the political culture in princely India but also of the nature and transformation of political thought and intellectual history in princely and modern India. The legal and intellectual history approach has opened a new global perspective in South Asian history.

Princely states provide fascinating understudied case materials for such histories, particularly in the way they envisaged modernity through the realms of law, constitutionalism, and federalism. These need to be explored from local, transnational, and global perspectives as shown by the articles included in this volume. Not only do they reveal the potential of legal history in princely India but, more importantly, they also illuminate many alternative visions and experiments in the field of constitutional and federal histories of modern India.



New cultural histories: princely patronage and global history of modernity

Princely modernity has emerged as an important paradigm in the new scholarship on princely states. We respond to the call by Janaki Nair to study the diverse constituents in the making of princely modernity (Nair 2012). One of the understudied aspects of princely states in global history is transnational princely journeys in shaping princely ideas of progress and modernity. A notable example of such global history is Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III of Baroda, who is the chief actor in the article contributed by Teresa Segura-Garcia. Going beyond the existing historiography where Sayaji Rao is written as model ruler of a model princely state, Segura-Garcia situates him within the wider dynamics of global intellectual history, particularly his connection with the United States of America. Segura-Garcia provides a rich archive and analysis of the various strands of American, European and Asian thought that shaped the making of a modern princely ruler and presence of Americans in princely Baroda.

This article allows us to look into the circulation of ideas, actors, artefacts, and technology within princely states and provide new perspectives on the intellectual and cultural histories of princely states. Moreover, these histories also reveal that the making of national culture, patronage, and post-colonial heritage relied heavily on princely state resources. This is most notable in the sphere of music, theatre, and dance. Anita Cherian's work has shown the reliance of national and regional cultural academies on the princely cultural resources of Patiala and Udaipur, especially in the field of music and fine arts, even as they established new structures and norms of post-colonial patronage. Indeed, the Sangeet Natak Akademi also relied on the musical heritage and patronage of princely states as they began transforming princely musicians into national artists (Cherian 2009).

Princely states like Rampur, Jaipur, Gwalior, and Patiala were important centres of music histories before their artists were turned into New Delhi government artists or Bombay film-industry singers. This shared geography of princely music gharanas and colonial and post-colonial patronage network has been studied by Janaki Bakhle, but her work focuses on Baroda and marginalises the historic role of Muslim, Sikh, and Rajput princely states like Rampur, Patiala, and Jaipur (Bakhle 2006). These princely pasts deserve attention even as we map the processes of nationalisation and Hinduisation of culture in colonial and post-colonial India. In my work on Princely Rampur, I have traced the genealogy and trajectory of these complex processes and provided new insights into the archives and politics of patronage of cultural institutions



in modern India that deserve further research by exploring the patronage of manuscripts and music at the Rampur library (Khan 2021).

Within the broader field of new cultural history, the scholarship on princely states provides fertile grounds to study urban history, history of architecture, and visual studies. The history of textiles, artefacts, and food can gain from the rich archives and insights from princely India. In recent times, an interest in heritage studies and a focus on historic houses and material culture studies paying attention to objects and artefacts is another valuable new line of inquiry. The fields of music, material, and food studies are also connected domains under multi-sensorial studies of aesthetics and emotions, where princely history has much to contribute. In my work on princely Rampur, I used global urban history, visual history, and music as well as food history in dialogue with the history of emotions to study minority pasts of a Muslim princely state (Khan 2022). This allows us to not only bring in new archival sources like autobiographies, photographs, travelogues, and recipe books but, more importantly, also to read the archive through a new lens of the history of emotions and experience.

Princely peripheries: boundaries, connections, and post-colonial South Asia

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Scholars remain aware of the legacies of the princely pasts in the present. We explore some of these contentious pasts by looking at princely states and their legacies in contemporary India, particularly as evidenced in the politicised debate and the abrogation of the 'special status' of the state of Jammu & Kashmir in India, which is explored in this issue by Marvi Slathia in her article. She reveals an entangled history of law, property, and documentation, which had started under Hindu princely rule, and how the communalised nature of these legislations connects with the recent abuse of law to impose a majoritarian logic on Kashmiri Muslims.

Moving beyond Kashmir as the only contested princely territory, we also include the smaller north-east chiefdoms and territories of Khasi-Jaintia as explored in the article by Sashi Teibor Laloo. His article also reveals a personal family history of Partition, citizenship, and memory from the hitherto ignored margins of small states and north-east India and Bangladesh border and adds to the Punjab and Bengal-focused historiography of Partition. Thus, articles selected in this special issue are not only about the princely pasts but also about their legacies in the making of borders and citizenship questions that continue to affect the north-east, and now also affect all of modern India through Citizenship



Amendment Act, 2019. Although consigned to the periphery, the scholarship on princely pasts of Kashmir, north-eastern states, and North-West Frontier Province in British India provides an important historical background to the continued presence of the past in the present and the challenges to a singular national history and the different narratives and imaginations of post-colonial visions.

Put together, the collection of these diverse articles in a special journal issue will extend critical horizons by examining both major and minor states; by including northern and southern princely states along with western, and north-eastern states, we hope to open up the field of connected princely states studies. We believe this diversity in the study of princely states and themes will make an important contribution not only to the study of princely states but also to modern Indian history.

New directions and challenges

Princely states are particularly interesting case studies for writing local as well global history at the same time. The rich historiography has helped us build a nuanced tradition where colonial archives and political histories have been examined to provide new social, cultural, intellectual, and economic and infrastructure histories emerging from princely states with greater exploration of vernacular archives and local perspectives. The task is now to connect these histories, firstly among princely states, and then with the British and wider global history. This will bring new attention to actors, institutions, and ideas from princely states in the making of colonial and post-colonial Indian history. It also has the potential to re-examine some of the dominant arguments prevalent in the field of political, legal, cultural, and intellectual history in South Asia. This special issue, based on the inclusion of long-term and emerging scholarship, has pointed at some of the new directions, but there are many more paths less taken.

There are some hurdles to be crossed and difficult areas to be explored. First is archival, particularly princely state archives and sensitive documents that might reveal new information. This needs consistent individual and institutional support for archival preservation and access. The Princely archive of Rampur was transferred to Allahabad State archives of Uttar Pradesh despite much efforts from the Rampur Nawabs, the members of Rampur Raza Library and the scholarly community. These documents are in great danger and need preservation. This is also the case with many other archives of princely states. The field of heritage and cultural studies seems especially productive, and the special issue suggests that the fields of architecture, music, dance, visual, and food history are particularly rewarding directions to pursue.



Second, we still know very little in terms of vernacular intellectual cultures and writings, particularly of princely administrators and subjects. Focus on libraries, archives, and manuscript collections within the broader approach of literary studies is likely to yield new insights. Some of the best libraries with historic collections, such as Saraswati Mahal Library, Thanjavur, the Rampur Raza Library and the Persian Research Institute, Tonk, were all started in princely states. The Bikaner Archives and Mehrangarh Research Centre in Jodhpur are other such princely institutions that deserve further research. A worthy example here is the exemplary study of Osmania University in princely Hyderabad by Kavita Datla (Datla 2013). We need a similar model of scholarship on institutional histories in princely India, which should also be extended to the study of print culture, such as the remarkable journal, *Islamic Culture*, published in princely Hyderabad, or the publication works on music by Rampur Raza Library. This is a remarkably fertile field that will provide a new impetus to South Asian intellectual history.

The issue of subject voices is equally important. But while we have a worthy model of scholarship provided by subaltern studies scholars, most notably by Shail Mayaram on subaltern subjects in the princely states, it has not been followed up by a focus on retrieving subaltern history in princely states (Mayaram 1997). This is partly an archival problem. But the recent interest in biographies and translation has produced some lived accounts of princely India. There is also some need to engage with works of fiction that emerged out of princely India, like the novel *Alam Panah*, which engages with the question of gender, class in the remnants of princely Hyderabad (Mohammed, 2023). The nostalgic presence of the past in the present is another productive direction. Princely states provide fascinating case studies in the field of nostalgia and heritage studies. However, this historical and archival project must also be a political one that provides, equally, both critical accounts of princely rule and of their contributions.

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Towards new conversations

In this special issue, we present new themes that are not limited to princely states and show interconnections between princely states as well as connected histories of princely and British India, and indeed also global history. Our contention is that this will not only reveal a more complex connected history of princely states but also help us re-examine the history of colonial and post-colonial India in a different light, unveiling princely experiences, experiments, and contributions in the making of modern Indian history. We hope this special issue will contribute to and start new conversations in the field so that we can move beyond the



boundaries and begin exploring connected histories of princely states with colonial and post-colonial India.

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