



Conceptual Study on Indian princely state

Prof. Vijaya M

Assistant Professor, Department of History
Government first grade college for women,
Doddaballapur, Bangalore Rural District

Abstract:- The discrediting of Indian kingship is obviously not unrelated to the relationship, lasting over a century, between Indian kings and the colonial power that dominated the subcontinent prior to their collective abolition. Just as the Americans propped up the Japanese monarchy for their own purposes post 1945, so in colonial Africa and India, the British sustained as an instrument of their power 'traditional' rulers who had apparently long out-lived their usefulness.

Introduction:

In an era of subaltern historiography and rising low-caste political consciousness, it seems that every previously silent minority and majority in India is acquiring a voice. The singular exception to this is the Indian princely state.¹ Unmourned, yet unforgotten, they dominated nearly half of the landscape in colonial times, yet for the most part were treated as mere pawns by the colonial power and entirely disregarded by the Indian national movement. The politically acceptable parts of India's princely past have been salvaged in histories of reforming diwans, or prime ministers, and studies concerning the power struggles amongst high or dominant caste elites.

The rajas, or kings, themselves and their families, however, have been entirely neglected. Even in studies of the colonial period, rajas are often depicted, in a spirit not unfamiliar to James Mill,² as ghosts of the past: powerless, self-indulgent, occasionally amusingly eccentric, yet of little political significance or social consequence. They are truly the people without history, whose role historians are little inclined to address. Since the abolition of the princely states soon after independence, and later (in 1971) the abolition of their stipends or 'privy purses' (sometimes described as mere 'pensions'), their descendants have become even more of an embarrassment: a curiosity to amuse tourists and a subject that Indians are disinclined to discuss in public. Nonetheless,

The former royal families still exist. Many have moved into business or politics and, through kin networks, exercise an influence disproportionate to their status as ordinary (albeit high-caste) citizens. In private, ordinary Indians still discuss and remember them, a great many ceremonial and ritual occasions still

require their presence, and, in many parts of India, a link to royalty, no matter how ephemeral, is still often used and valued. Politicians and leaders in various walks of life seek to imitate them and employ kingly symbols, discourses, and instruments of patronage. The discrediting of Indian kingship is obviously not unrelated to the relationship, lasting over a century, between Indian kings and the colonial power that dominated the subcontinent prior to their collective abolition. Just as the Americans propped up the Japanese monarchy for their own purposes post 1945, so in colonial Africa and India, the British sustained as an instrument of their power 'traditional' rulers who had apparently long out-lived their usefulness, or in

some cases had never even previously existed. In most cases, it has been argued, the resulting locus of kingship became entirely meaningless and hollow. At its worst, their relationship with the British has been regarded as treasonous, a source of profound inequality, and severely injurious to the growth of democratic, civil society. But how true is this, and do such critical perspectives make any sense from contemporary and indigenous points of view? We can bring these questions closer to the subject of this volume by describing the dusty streets of Mysore city. Every Sunday night in Mysore, the palace is brilliantly lit with multi-coloured lights that bathe the streets and delight the gaze of the tourists who flock to the city centre to see them.

The secon of the former Maharaja of Mysore still has the right to occupy a part (but not all) of this palace, and it is the association with his family name that affords the palace such distinction. Yet the lights are paid for by the Karnataka state government and they are illuminated, not in reverence or commemoration of the maharaja's dynasty, but simply to promote the image of the 'royal city', wherein the palace is the most symbolic monument. There were more than five hundred princely states in India (including present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh) that had native Indian 'rulers'³ as their sovereigns under British rule. They occupied nearly forty-five per cent of the area and governed thirty-five per cent of the population of India before the Partition in 1947. Even in the area under direct British control, many zamindars and village landlords, who did not have any title, nor recognition as native rulers, sometimes called themselves *rājā*, or behaved as if they were. India was indeed a kingdom of kings. Even in present times, we can see many former native rulers or their descendants playing important roles in public life. Some of them also still fantasise about their royal lifestyle, which they seek to regenerate and sustain through a new involvement in the contemporary consumer culture of India (Ramusack 1995).

They are no longer rulers or sovereigns, but they are still functioning as 'royals'. Beyond their official capacities, kingship continues to shape political behaviour in some parts of India and to invest it with a meaning that is recognisable to ordinary people. This is particularly the case in the South. To understand the role of kingship in political life, it is important to realise that it is not just one thing, but has several forms and faces. It does not merely occupy the limited space created for it by colonialism, nor does it entirely reproduce the symbolic and political order of pre-colonial times, since that world has ceased to exist. Instead, kingship has adapted and changed and has learned to work at several levels. Most crucially, however,

it still serves a significant function in connecting people at a local level to wider political spheres in contemporary India.⁴ To make sense of this, we must investigate the roles that kingship performs, and how it came to assume its present forms in South India, through the experience of the recent and colonial past

Caste, king, and dominance

Indian kingship occupies an ambiguous and uncertain position in theories of Indian society. This is because, in the theory of varna hierarchy, although kings

Introduction 3 and landlords have been economically and politically powerful throughout the history of Indian subcontinent, the Kshatriya varna, to which Indian kings claim to belong, has only the second highest position next to the Brahmins. The second-ary position of Kshatriyas in the caste hierarchy was analysed theoretically in Louis Dumont's influential and controversial work on caste, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980). Dumont argued that the hierarchical structure of the caste system is based on a single principle: the opposition of the pure and the impure (ibid.: 43). By this definition, the Kshatriyas who engage themselves with 'impure' activities, such as meat eating, animal sacrifices, and war, have to reconcile themselves to their inferior position in relation to the Brahmins, whose main concern is to maintain their 'purity'. Dumont further claimed that hierarchy can be defined as the principle by which the elements (each caste) within a whole are ranked in relation to the whole (hierarchy or the system of caste), and that since, in the majority of societies, it is the religious ideology which provides the view of the whole, this ranking will be religious in nature (ibid.: 66). Although Dumont acknowledged the fact that the caste system gave a certain precedence to the domain of political and economical power, which the Kshatriya embodies (this is the reason why vegetarian merchants had to accept a position subordinate to Kshatriyas), he nonetheless concluded that 'in theory, power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood...

Status and power, and consequently spiritual authority and temporal authority, are absolutely distinguished' (ibid.: 71–2). Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* has inspired many debates and polemics amongst scholars of Indian society and has encouraged the emergence of numerous alternative views on caste (Das 1982; Dirks 1987; Fuller 1992; Gupta 2000; Parry 1980, 1985, 1986, 1994; Raheja 1988a; Quigley 1993, 1995 etc.). In thinking about Indian kingship under colonialism within these debates, a particularly important point for us to note is the Orientalist element in his theorisation. Thus, some scholars have argued that Dumont's view of caste was not exactly novel, but was the ultimate synthesis of the Orientalist and colonial views of Indian society, which contrast the spiritual and holistic Orient to the rational and individualist West (cf. Marriott 1969; Appadurai 1986; Inden 1986a, 1986b; Dirks 1989; Raheja 1988b). In several respects, therefore, his views on caste still require historicisation. The Dumontian view of caste has met with diverse criticism from anthropologists, who were able to offer alternative views of caste and hierarchy using ethnological evidence. Most of them are what Dipankar Gupta describes as 'Hocart-inspired' scholars, who emphasise the centrality of Indian kings and dominant castes both in the ritual and cultural life of Indian society, rather than ascribing to the Brahminical perspective which Dumont's work clearly supported (Gupta 2000: 116–47). Thus, Jonathan Parry and Gloria G. Raheja separately found that, in the gift-exchange between clients and funeral priests in Benares, or between

dominant castes and Brahmins in a village in UP (Uttar Pradesh), Brahmins are reluctant to take certain gifts (dān) from their patron, since the gift contains the inauspiciousness of the donor, yet they are nonetheless still obliged to receive them (Parry 1985; Raheja 1988a).

This ethnographical evidence shows that Brahmins are, like other service, recipients of the sin (or inauspiciousness) of the dominant caste and they cannot refuse this role. Quigley also contested Dumont's idea that only the Brahmins occupy the highest ritual position by emphasising the ritual reciprocity and equivalence between castes, based upon his research in Nepal (Quigley 1993, 1995). The contribution of various anthropologists has been to not only present alternative perspectives, but also to question the separation of the domains of religion and politics, which was a fundamental shared theoretical assumption of the Orientalist and colonial scholars, as well as of Dumont's work. They have thus argued that kings and dominant castes occupy the central position, not only in the narrowly defined politico-economic domain, but also in the cultural and religious domains, which Dumont insisted was dominated by the Brahmin. Although anthropologists have to a large extent successfully contested Dumont's Brahmin-centred views on caste, they have not necessarily taken the historical dimension into account.

Their model, whether Kshatriya-centred or not, still remains ahistorical and, therefore, presupposes a relatively unchanging India. Nicolas Dirks, on the other hand, has presented an alternative caste theory that is historically specific (Dirks 1987). He has argued, through an examination of the ethnohistory of Pudukkottai, a 'little kingdom' in Tamil Nadu, that the ritual and political centrality of Indian kings was undermined by British rule and that the image of traditional India or caste society, with the Brahmins at its apex, was nothing but an invention of colonialism (see also Dirks 2001: 3–6). Dirks' detailed historical sources described the significant political and religious role of kings in pre-colonial Indian polities (which he calls 'the old regime') and its subsequent decline. Interestingly, Dirks argues, this 'decline' of the old regime did not happen through their being weakened or marginalised, but was effected through their being re-invented by colonialism as a splendid 'theatre state', which was in actuality a mere charade of the old regime.

The work of Nicholas has been significant in enriching our understanding of the role of colonialism in the modern formation of Indian 'tradition' and has offered a very effective critique of Orientalist tendencies within modern social sciences. His thesis was provocative and convincing. Yet, it is based upon a small Indian state, which could have been a Zamindari estate, considering its territorial size and population. Dirk's study could, therefore, be criticised as unrepresentative and requires at least to be tested by comparison with neighbouring Indian princely states. The actual effects of colonialism in Dirk's study are also glossed over somewhat hurriedly, the focus being primarily on the pristine order of the pre-colonial kingdom, before it was sullied by European contact. This volume, by contrast, sets out to question specifically the relationship between Indian kingship and colonialism.

Conclusion:- The transformation of Indian kingship during the colonial period did indeed mediate the transition from the pre-colonial polity to post-colonial democracy. However, this does not mean that elements of the old regime simply survived through colonial times. The ideas and practices of old polity were re-examined and re-interpreted in order to fit with the radically changing nature of colonial societies and to meet with new demands from the people. From this perspective we encounter a key point of criticism in that the political practices of contemporary India still rely heavily on the language and ideas of kingship, even after the demise of the king. Dirks' argument fails to give any insight into this contemporary cultural aspect of political behaviour, which might arguably be seen as evidence of the survival of the political repertoire of 'the old regime'. In emphasising the enduring cultural and social roles of kingship, there is a danger that we may overlook the social changes and transformations inevitably brought about by colonial modernity. This poses the danger of taking us back to the Orientalists' construction of an 'unchanging' India. This is not a specific problem that studies of Indian kingship have encountered, but it is a more general dilemma faced by the historiography of colonial and post-colonial India. How historians have addressed this issue offers some important insights that need to be considered by anthropologists and others working within the same field.

Bibliography:

- Kaviraj, Sudipta (1994) 'On the Construction of Colonial Power', in D. Engels and S. Marks (eds), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: state and society in India and Africa*, London: I. B. Tauris.
- (2010) *The Imaginary Institution of India: politics and ideas*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kenny, Judith T. (1995) 'Climate, Race, and Imperial Authority: the symbolic landscape of the British hill station in India', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85 (4): 694–714
- .Khare, Harish (1973) 'Restructuring of Values: princes in 1971 elections', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (4): 405–15.
- Kimura, Masaaki and Tanabe, Akio (eds) (2006) *The State in India: past and present*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- King, Richard (1999) 'Orientalism and the Modern Myth of "Hinduism"', *Nuemen*, 46 (2): 146–85.
- Knight, L. A. (1968) 'The Royal Titles Act and India', *The Historical Journal*, 11 (3): 488–507.
- Kooiman, Dick (2001) *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s*, New Delhi:
- Manohar.Kulke, Hermann (1982) 'Fragmentation and Segmentation versus Integration? Reflections on the Concepts of Indian Feudalism and the Segmentary State in Indian History', *Studies in History* 4 (2): 237–63. — (ed.) (1995) *The State in India 1000–1700*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Leach, E. R. (1961) *Rethinking Anthropology*, New York: The Athlone Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969) *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Lind, Kyrre Magnus (2004) *The Nagar Rebellion 1830–31: administration and rule in an Indian native state*, unpublished dissertation, University of Oslo.
- Lingat, Robert (1973) *The Classical Law of India*, Berkeley: University of California, translated from French by J. D. M. Derrett. (The original French edition, 1967, *Les sources du droit dans le système traditionnel de l'Inde*, Paris: Mouton.)
- Mahadev, P. D. (1975) *People, Space & Economy of an Indian City: an urban morphology of Mysore City*, Mysore: Institute of Development Studies.
- Major, R. H. (1857) *India in the Fifteenth Century: a collection of narrative voyages to India*, London: