Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland: Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter

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During the early colonial period, 'borderland' societies located on the fringes of major political regions of South Asia very often exhibited a deceptive simplicity. They retained separate identities through centuries of existence, yet had much in common with 'mainstream' people. The smaller polities into which they were divided shifted constantly between cooperation and conflict with each other. And their relationship with powerful mainland states that periodically gained dominance vacillated between resistance, subterfuge and acceptance. Rulers of peripheral states guarded their autonomy, but also embraced the practices of dominant cultures to establish their legitimacy. The grander monarchies at the political centre tended to produce authoritative histories of their rule. Local elites and landholders on the fringe made do with oral traditions, ballads and legends. These lesser 'historical' traditions sometimes assimilated small portions of major histories to validate their historicity. However, these traditions could also contradict hegemonic histories and question ideological conventions. The poverty of resources and the inaccessible terrain made fringe areas rather modest prizes for invaders. For the most part, they remained geographically secluded and politically autonomous. Indeed, it was travellers, traders and explorers who for a long time provided a brief glimpse of these outlying societies to outsiders. Subsequently, English East India Company papers and correspondence became more common, albeit biased, sources for historians. The relationship between 'borderlands' and 'mainland' remained ambivalent and fluid in precolonial times. This fluidity is also evident in *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland* that deals, not with the precolonial period described above, but with the 'early colonial encounter'. Nevertheless, many of the concepts discussed in the book

are rooted in precolonial political processes. The book analyses selected events of the 1790s and the first four decades of the nineteenth century to explain how these concepts were transformed. This was a time of change. The crumbling Mughal Empire was yielding to state builders and military adventurers. Gorkha and the Punjab had expanded extensively into powerful kingdoms. Most significant, however, was the growing reach of the English East India Company.

Amidst this turmoil, hill rulers too redefined their relationships with each other. In doing so, they sought support from the new rising powers. This support from outside, however, changed the structure of their states (pp. 126–34; p. 162) and prompted them to portray a new 'Pahari Rajput' identity (p. 15). The sociopolitical 'fluidity' of their frontier region made these changes possible. According to Moran, modernity was introduced in the region as part of the 'colonial encounter' (though this is a rather contentious question). He argues that, as a result, the sociocultural norms and political practices of Himalayan societies were greatly transformed. Many of these were therefore only of 'perceived antiquity'. This perception emerged from interaction between hill rulers and colonial officials in the nineteenth century (p. 197). Modern (British) historiography further fashioned an image of a local elite accustomed to both Brahmanical principles and heterodoxy (p. 203). Thus, even the 'Rajput' identity of hill rulers was a modern creation, the result of diverse interests interacting in a newly emerging colonial context.

Research on western Himalayan history is impeded by the dearth of reliable sources. Dateable inscriptional and archival material is unevenly scattered across different periods of time and places. Less reliable, but rich, bardic traditions partially compensate for this drawback. Formal archival research has therefore to be combined with a critical evaluation of oral traditions and a fieldbased appreciation of the landscape and its people. As a result, a patchy picture usually emerges, remarkably clear in parts and hazy in others. Portions of the book are fully supported by archival documentation. Elsewhere, discussions are based on legends and bardic accounts. The latter, though imprecise regarding dates, are more informative than documents about the names of persons and places. This renders the story interesting but creates problems. Nevertheless, Moran brings a range of skills to bear upon his subject. He has teased out

significant ideas from diverse sources and has developed new arguments of theoretical relevance.

The first three of a total of five chapters in the book are almost standalone descriptions of different events: (i) the battle of Chinjhiar, 1795; (ii) the Gorkha invasion and ensuing Nepali rule; and (iii) events involving ruling-class women and the question of *sati*. Moran interconnects these different events via thematic notions such as the *pahari* (hill person), the Rajput (including ideals, norms and observances) and the agency of royal women in politics. It is argued that these ideas grew out of a shared historical process experienced under early colonialism in the region.

The battle of Chinjhiar is a popular bardic narrative that the book recounts and supplements with histories of a later date. It was a conflict between three key hill chiefs and was probably the last major confrontation that stemmed from traditional precolonial rivalries and ambitions. Thereafter, according to Moran, the *pahari* king was transformed into a Sanskritised Rajput who portrayed himself as a 'modern version of the Kshatriya sovereign of antiquity' (p. 54). The second chapter discusses three important issues related to the Nepali invasion: (i) the rise of Sansar Chand of Kangra; (ii) shifting politics in Sirmaur; and (iii) the nature of Nepali rule in the Himachal Himalaya. Moran is probably the first scholar to seriously question the 'Katoch legend' and to explain how later histories created a myth around the Kangra ruler. Sansar Chand's popular image in folklore and local histories as an 'emperor of the hills' is not supported by factual evidence. The Mughals appropriated most of the Kangra territories for more than a century and a half. A Mughal garrison, commanded by a *qiladar*, controlled Kangra Fort from 1620 onwards. The Katoch rulers lived in political insignificance, confined to a small area. Sansar Chand's tenuous control of Kangra Fort over a period of about 26 years (1783–1809) and short-lived military successes hardly constitute an epic of dynastic greatness. He died (1824) a tributary to the Lahore court.

Moran has unearthed interesting archival information on the politics of Sirmaur. He rightly points out that, as Khash people, the Nepali invaders and western Himalayan defenders belonged to the same ethnicity. In stressing commonalities, however, he underestimates how divergent historical experiences and the sheer passage of time

can nurture diversity within an ethnic group. More significant are his arguments regarding the nature of Nepali rule in the western Himalaya. In the third chapter, Moran questions the male-dominated image of Rajput society by arguing that rulingclass women in western Himalayan states played an active role in politics. Examples from the kingdoms of Bilaspur, Bashahr and Sirmaur illustrate this point. A section in this chapter discusses two of Gayatari Spivak's widely read articles: namely, 'The Rani of Sirmur' and 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak's readings, says Moran, flatten out the complex world of non-Western women. A more nuanced approach is called for. Contrary to what Spivak argues, the rani in question exercised agency. She wielded power as regent – even while the deposed raja (her husband) was alive. She was not a voiceless 'subaltern'. Biographies constructed from 'fragmentary historical materials' can often be misleading. Each of the first three chapters questions important aspects of existing historical understanding. While some of the answers may appear to be exploratory, they do open new areas for future research.

The last two chapters merge into each other. They are fully supported by archival sources and the discussion focuses on a power struggle within the kingdom of Bilaspur (Kahlur) between 1795 and 1840. Over this extended period, this involved two rajas of Bilaspur (Kharak Chand and his successor Jagat Chand), close members of the ruling family and its collaterals. The other participants were powerful functionaries of Bilaspur, ruling chiefs of some neighbouring states and officials of the English East India Company. Mercenaries employed by the Bilaspur raja further contributed to the prevailing disorder. Fateh Prakash – who ruled Sirmaur during the period 1827–50 and whose sisters were married to Kharak Chand – played a particularly important role. Events that occurred in different places and at different times have been brought together to create the larger narrative of intrigue, manipulation and armed conflict that overwhelmed Bilaspur during these stormy years. Major conclusions drawn from these events reinforce the arguments made in the first three chapters.

One such conclusion is that the British undermined the customary balance of power between the raja and members of the extended ruling class. In lending support to the former, they weakened power groups within the state that had counterbalanced the raja's authority. This

ironically created a near absolutist monarchy even as the transition towards 'modernity' was underway. Colonial policy endeavoured to keep hill states confined within 'clearly demarcated boundaries under landed gentries' (p. 134). One may recall that even under the Mughals, subordinate rulers – all referred to as *zamindars* (landholders) irrespective of their status – were punished for encroaching upon each other's territory. Moran also argues that the Himalayan states were integrated into the 'military market in so far as their armed forces were primarily made of ad hoc coalitions of peasantwarriors' (p. 152). This may be true for the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries when Rohilla mercenaries offered their services to some states. In the normal course of events, and unlike the richer states in the plains, hill rulers almost invariably mobilised a ragtag army of peasants from amongst their subjects. They were not professional soldiers employed from the military labour market that thrived in large parts of the subcontinent.

Several of Moran's arguments have theoretical implications and thus provide new perspectives. For that reason, they need to be further examined. Two ideas – the '*pahari*' and the Rajput – are central to the book. They are further entwined with the concepts of 'kingship' and the 'state'. Together, these ideas become the basis of a 'uniform conceptual model of the (Pahari) "Rajput State"' (p. 18) based on presuppositions of British officials about western Himalayan history. Moran also concludes that '...the Pahari Rajput rulers revised their pasts along lines of Indic Kshatriya kings to display what is possibly the most successful case of regional integration into the body politic of modern South Asia' (p. 201). He suggests that terms such as 'Rajput Tradition', 'Rajput State', 'Pahari Rajput' kingship/polity etc took on a new meaning. The book argues that these concepts, as currently understood in the western Himalaya, emerged during the early colonial encounter.

Very few of the histories of the region, written in the early twentieth century, are based on reliable pre-modern historical sources. Thus, important links between its earlier history and colonial developments have remained relatively unexplored. Western Himalayan rulers had just as long established ties with the Mughal court as the rajas of Rajasthan did. Dharm Chand, the Kangra ruler, accepted Mughal suzerainty in the very first year (1556–7) of Akbar's reign. Other hill rulers followed him later and were all confirmed in their kingdoms. Raja Basu of Paithan

(father of Jagat Singh) was an important courtier of Emperor Jahangir as early as 1607. He commanded the Mughal army despatched in 1611 against Mewar, the most respected Rajput kingdom of Rajasthan. Some of the most famous, early Punjab legends relate to Rajput warriors, many of whom, interestingly, had converted to Islam. It was quite possible that the ruling clans in the adjoining hills, too, had acquired their Rajput status before the Mughals came to power. There is no clear evidence to indicate that rulers of the western Himalaya 'consistently modelled their world after that of Rajasthani Rajputs' (p. 87) or that they had developed a distinct '*pahari* Rajput' concept of kingship that was subsequently altered under British influence (p. 54). Their political circumstances did change under colonial rule, but the idea of a '*pahari* Rajput' kingship does not seem integral to this change. Moran specifies that the term 'Pahari' refers to 'the Khas ethnic majority of Himachal Pradesh' (p. 14, footnote 1). However, he uses it to refer also to the ruling clans. It is unlikely that the latter – who were a small minority amongst their predominantly Khash/Kanet subject peasantry – used the term '*pahari*' to supplement their Rajput identity. Its use in some local traditions and legends denotes a shared loyalty to places. This did not necessarily make it a component of caste or of the concept of kingship.

Moran mentions three theoretical models of sovereignty: Indo–Persian; North Indian Rajput; and Local (p. 66). In practice, they all overlapped, especially in Rajput-ruled states across India. The loose clan-based polity of the Rajputs had regional variations and responded diversely to political exigencies. Research has shown that the 'tension between tribal and caste elements' (p. 88) in pre-modern Indian society was not 'fundamental' and was more apparent than real. Their borders were permeable, and the Little and Great Traditions were entwined parts of one system. Most pre-modern states therefore accommodated both orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The language and content of numerous ancient/medieval temple inscriptions and land grants to Brahmins reveal that rulers in the western Himalaya, like their contemporaries elsewhere, sanctified their authority through formal Brahmanical practices. Later, diverse warrior clans rose to power through processes of conquest and state-building in most of North India. This new ruling class adopted the generic term 'Rajput'. Thus began the medieval phenomenon of 'Rajputization' of ruling clans, both old and new. Paradoxically, and

contrary to what Moran argues, the 'Kshatriya sovereign of antiquity' needed to dilute his rigid classical image to adopt the more energetic one of the 'Rajput'. The 'Rajputization' process continued and colonial records reveal how it was subsequently used by many Khash/Kanet landholders in specified areas for upward mobility. The latter were often influential officials in Rajput-ruled hill states, but never assimilated into the ruling clans.

Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland is among the few books on the Himachal Himalaya that offer an alternative historiography. Arik Moran uses several new sources. He brings to the table a set of original ideas that contest a prevailing historical understanding. This calls for serious discussion and a willingness amongst historians to move from purely empirical issues towards theoretical questions. There are also some things that the reader might disagree with. The last few paragraphs of this review are not so much a criticism of the book as an attempt to engage with it.

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