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The Princely States Of Rajputana Ethic, Authority And Structure

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Abstract : The Indian subcontinent has seen a wide variety of traditional polities in its time, from the great imperial reigns of the Mauryas and Guptas and Moghuls on the one hand to the local Republics of the Buddhist era on the other. But the characteristic government of India in the Pre-British period was the geographically limited monarchy, exercising sovereignty over one of India's regions. The Rajput stales of north-west India exercised such monarchical power in a context which has sometimes been described as feudal. This essay is only indirectly concerned with the issue of feudalism. It is, rather, an analysis of the form and character of the princely slate, including its ethic, authority and structure.

Keywords: rajasthan, princely, states, rajputana, structure, ethic.

The chaos of the t8th century reduced Rajasthan to an imperfect reflection of its earlier more "normal" self. Old Rajputana must be re-constructed from what English observers discovered through their own experience and conversations and through older records. The evidence is sparse and often contradictory. The ethic of the ruling class stressed spirit, valor and abandon, frowning upon intellect, prudence and calculations of utility; political legitimacy rested mainly on ascription; political power was fragmented and diffused; administration was weakly articulated; the effective political community was defined and limited by caste; its non-Rajput

component never convert- ed influence into right: and the obligations and duties of rulers were private and familial rather than public and universal.

The ethic of the ruling class did not support successful statesmanship. The caste-culture of the Rajput warrior-rulers of Rajasthan resembled that of Rajputs elsewhhere in north India, but it expressions were more intense, more literary, more elegant than the culture of those who had long ago lost their economic means, social standing and public authority. They were reared to cherish the virtues and honor of a warrior-ruler aristocracy and to disdain economic and intellectual skills. To live otherwise, to engage for example in the mundane pursuits of commerce or agricultural labor, was degrading. To cultivate the intellect would weaken the spirit. "The Rajput disdains the plow," was the common observation of the ethnographers. "A Rajput who reads will never ride a horse," says a proverb. The caste-culture was so resolutely transmitted that both English and Indians have mistaken the martial virtues for a biological inheritance of Rajputs.

Valor without regard for consequences was the keystone of Traditional ideals. As a law of the Rajputs, it was unhinged by any considerations of utility. The favored tales even today are not stories of great military victories, but of disasters.

This romanticism, this ethic of absolute ends, was not hospitable to successful statesmanship, which requires calculations of utility and an ethic of consequences. The most successful house in Rajasthan, Jaipur, which produced a series of brilliant and shrewd Maharajas capable of adjusting to the political winds of their times, has always stood low in the esteem of bards. Udaipur, which lay wasted and depopulated during large parts of its history while its Maharajas refused the inevitable allegiance to the Mughul, stands very high.

The legitimacy of political leadership-Maharajas and Nobles-rested on lineage, caste and land. Ancient pedigree was crucial for Rajput self-definition and esteem. The oldest ruling clan in Rasjasthan, the Sesodia at Udaipur, was probably established in its present lands in 728 A.O., although it traces its blood to earlier ruling princes, and recalls an even more distant clan descent from the deities Rama and Vishnu and the sun and moon. Ancient genealogies showed that the noble blood had not been diluted by ignoble infusions.

The desire for ancient and "pure" blood, common among aristocracy in general, was strengthened by the demands of clan, significant to Rajput polity, and caste. Each of the Rajput states was ruled by a particular clan at whose head stood the Maharaja, the nearest descendant in direct line from the founder of the stale. Caste, which required that Rajputs could marry only one another, reinforced the aristocratic demand for "purity" with a socio-religious sanction. Rajputs still like to point out that the Maharaja himself may marry the daughter of a poverty-stricken Rajput without dishonor attaching to him on account of the connection.

Traditional caste theory maintains that a well-ordered Hindu state should be ruled by Kshatriyas. This rule has not always prevailed, and history knows of Brahman and low-caste dynasties. But the Rajputs were Kshotrlyas, and their rule was supported by the legitimacy of caste and ritual rank as well as the practical agencies of power.

The Rajputs were strongly attached to their land. The size of his estate as well as the closeness of his blood relationship to the Maharaja helped place a nobleman in the hierarchy of a Maharaja's court. It is true, as Lyall says, that "land tenure is not the base of this noblest, but their pure blood is the origin of their land tenure. No one could, as in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, become a Rajput and an aristocrat by acquiring land and pursuing genteel life.

Yet if land was not the foundation, the "cause" of Rajput eminence, that eminence could not have been sustained without it.

Lineage, caste, land are elements which legitimized a Maharaja or local chief regardless of specific achievement. Professor Basham has remarked in another context that divinity was cheap in ancient India, where every Brahman and saintly man could lay some claim to it. The same was probably true in Rajasthan. These various supports usually preserved the Maharaja's or noble's standing, although something more was required to retain the active support of fellow Rajputs in crisis. But old Rajasthan was a sufficiently practical place that legitimacy by ascription did survive every circumstance. Some Maharajas, like the Raja of Jodhpur, lost their position when they fell from the standard of fortitude. Others met their end after bloody or disrespectful treatment of their fellow Rajputs.

In old Rajasthan power was widely diffused. Rajputana or Rajwaro did not refer to single political unit, but rather to the area over which Rajputs exercised political power, an area comprising many polities. Most "states" were dominated by one clan, the Kachwahas at Jaipur, the Rathors at Jodbpur, and the Sesodios at Udaipur. The clan chief ruled as Maharaja. Clan rivalries kept the areas divided from one another;

1527 marks the last date on which the clans were persuaded to unite and fight together. To be sure, Rajputana had a cultural and ethnic unity. A common caste culture, expressed through literature and the shared chivalric ethic, a feeling that all Rajputs were peers, created a common psychological climate even if it led to no political unity. And the demands of exogamy, which forced Rajputs to seek brides from clans other than their own, often sent them in search of wives to other states. Maharajas and nobles of different states were related to one another by kinship ties, as when the Maharaja of Jodhpur, a Rathor, married a sister of his fellow prince at Udaipur, a Sesodia.

Power within each state was further diffused among the powerful Jagirdars, holders of estates or jagirs, many of them clan brethren of the Maharaja. They exercised an almost exclusive domain in their areas. The clan relationship tended to equalize Maharaja and Jagirdar. The entire clan, not merely the forefathers of the Maharaja, bad conquered the state, hence the clan brethren could deny that their estates derived from the Maharaja. As the leading Rathor jagirdars, expelled from Jodhpur state after a dispute with their ruler.

But the clan relationship existed side by side with the more voluntary features. It was not merely blood which bound noble to Maharaja, it was also a pledging, on the part of the noble, of fealty, and a recognition of obligation to provide horse and foot in war and certain court services in peacetime in return for the Maharaja's confirmation of his estate."

According to a theory, clan "should" precede and be extinguished by feudal relationships. In India, caste, in this case the Rajput caste has preserved clan as its internal structuring circles, i.e. as the designations of the exogamous groups within the caste, while within the caste, quasi-feudal relations have arisen among the caste fellows. These relations, in which confirmation of the estate by the Maharaja became a pre-condition for occupying the estate, and vassals in turn owed obligations, added a less egalitarian note than clan alone would suggest. The Maharaja was, by these relationships, a source of the noble's estate, and in this sense superior. The pledges also added contractual overtones to an organic relationship.

Feudal and clan relations both suggest the diffusion of power and the weak articulation of the state. Where political units possessed attributes of a "state," they possessed them incompletely. Power was an extension of person, not office, and depended heavily on the qualities of the man occupying the Maharaja's gaddi.

Institutions to give states continuing effectiveness, like strong fiscal powers, a central military force, a unified "Maharaja's

justice," and professional administration, developed sporadically. The strong bureaucratic and military organization of the Moghuls suggested reorganization to some of the abler Maharajas in the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Maharajas' fiscal power, an important indicator of the strength of the "state," was weak throughout Rajasthan. The Maharaja's most obvious source of income was the khalsa, the "crown lands," whose tenants paid a land-tax to the Maharaja. Most states maintained a bureaucracy for crown lands. But khalsa comprised only a small part of a state's territory, and the nobles resisted the Maharaja's expansion of power into their domains. The Jagirdars contributed little to the state's exchequer; some were obligated to pay tribute and quitrent, "but most paid only a fee (nazarana) when the Maharaja confirmed them in their estate at the time of succession. Attempts to include nobles' lands in the Maharaja's customs cordon and to collect duties from their commerce generally failed. Some Maharajas, for example Bikaner who was strong in his nobles, did exact a kind of head-tax and house-lax in nobles' territory. Even there the Maharaja's agents collected it indirectly through his nobles."

The military situation confirms the pattern of diffusion. Before the "lime of troubles," the Maharajas relied mainly on levies contributed by the nobles, a practice which kept them dependent on their inferior. The armies which Rajput princes led all over India to fight for the Moghul were recruited in this manner. During the late eighteenth century, each court made attempts to build up mercenary forces dependent exclusively on the crown, often armed with light artillery. Generally these forces came from outside the state, a commentary on the difficulties of persuading Rajputs to change their conception of military honor. Udaipur had Sindhis, Jodhpur Rohillas and Afghans. Jaipur had 3,000 "foreign" troops, and Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Kota also employed mercenaries. Earlier efforts in this direction met resistance from the nobles, who, like chivalry

elsewhere, fancied the dash of cavalry. In the sixteenth century, Maharaja Bikram Ajit at Udaipur increased the disgust which finally drove his nobles to regicide by building up and giving prestige to fool soldiery at the expense of the nobles' cavalry. But military reorganization along more modern lines remained incomplete, though mounted feudal levies were clearly on the decline by the time the British arrived.

Pluralism and diffusion of power appears again in the operation of the Maharaja's justice. One may conceive or three legal jurisdictions in Rajputana-villagc and Maharajas' justice-although the word jurisdiction suggests far more rational a division or competence than the informal arrangements or this era warrant. Village and caste panchayats dealt with offenses in rural areas, disposing or the great majority of all cases. Caste usage and local custom were the main regulators of conduct at the village level, and interpretation rested with the community-either caste or village council. While the evidence of Tod and some other political agents is sparse, it is probable that here as in British India local crimes of violence-for example, feuds in which villagers assaulted and even killed one another-were often settled locally by the panchayats through fines and other restitution arrangements. But major crimes of larceny or assault, especially if they involved criminals-like roving bands of dacoits who could not be subdued locally, attracted the attention or the jagirdar or of the Maharaja. A good Jagirdar believed it part of his function to protect his part of the state from predation and to provide compensation money where he failed. However, in the time of troubles, when chaos had reduced the noble orders to desperation, and in 1948, when land reforms and the dissolution of princely armies had done the same, some jagirdars became themselves predators. But in ordinary limes, villagers called on them as arbitrators and judges in civil and criminal causes, especially in disputes which had not been satisfactorily disposed of by local panchayats. The Maharaja's

officers took cognizance of similar issues in the khalsa lands, where royal revenue agents acted as judicial officers. Some matters were referred to the Maharaja himself, who granted the right of petition. The courts or the Maharaja's agents never, however, entered the lands of the nobles. "To 'erect the flag' within his (a noble's) limits... is deemed a gross breach of his privileged independence." The distinction between Maharaja's and noble's, legal jurisdiction limited the reach of Maharaja's power in some areas.

The ruler could not with impunity reach behind Ws nobles to establish direct connections with their sub-vassals or subjects. The "sub- vassals," lesser nobles holding grants from great nobles, were very particular about fealty to their own chief, and any interference by the Maharaja was greatly resented.

The ruler's capacity to strengthen himself against the nobility depended largely on the effectiveness of his administration. Most of the ruler's bureaucrats were not Rajputs, but drawn from the Vaishya, Brahman and Kayasth castes. They were not as sensitive to the niceties of Rajput caste and clan sentiments as the ruler, and more willing to assert power.

But the bureaucracy had not the confidence or competence of a professional class recruited by object.ive criteria of merit. Caste was believed to qualify for bureaucratic posts, and this belief was not wholly unrealistic. Castes had .certain prescribed duties and occupations, and individuals or families who honored tradition cultivated the qualities attributed to that caste. While a Brahman then and now is not always a learned man, Brahman families stressed learning. A son of the commercial castes was reared to grasp figures and accounting, und physical daring was expected of Rajputs. While many must have fallen short of the caste ideal, it did command some compliance with its standards.

In accord with these ideas, the posts of the "military premiers," dignitaries who advised the ruler on clan and military

problems, were traditionally held by the leading Rajput noblemen. The post of civil premier was also often hereditary, but its incumbent was never a Rajput. In fact, Rajputs were considered unfit to be bureaucrats, partly because they were not a literate caste, partly because of their independent spirit. The premier's office fell to other castes, Udaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer running to merchant castes, and Jaipur and Bundi running to Borah Brahmans. In Jodhpur, Brahmans too occasionally held this office. In all of the states, Kayasths as scribes supplied state record keepers. Revenue officials in Udaipur and elsewhere were almost all drawn from the commercial castes, competent in accounting. The commercial or scribe castes who supplied so much of the remaining administration were excluded from posts involving criminal adjudication, as they were adverse to violence. In Jodhpur, Brahmans, as initiates of traditional legal texts, often held the post of legal counsel for the court.

Many posts were hereditary, held by the descendants of Vaishya and Brahman families who bad originally settled the state with the Maharajas forebears. Neither heredity nor caste assured competence in the sense in which, for example, Chinese competitive examinations did, although the caste traditions often produced able men.

The relative weakness of the bureaucracy was related to slow development of a rational administrative structure both at court and in the country and of regular administrative procedures. They neither assured efficiency through the division of labor and specialization, nor responsibility through clear definition of jurisdiction, nor the conditions for control and accountability. The court divided "crown lands" into distorts, and posted representatives to each to collect revenue and enforce law and order." But its servants sometimes made themselves sufficiently independent that their services gave uncertain support to the central power. This was true, for example, in parts of Bikaner, where portions of the crown lands were farmed out, and in

Jodhpur, where so late as 1870 the court's representatives on khalsa (crown) lands are described as "exercising for the time the some jurisdiction in these lands as the thakur does permanently over his estate."

The bureaucracy failed to strengthen the state's hand partly because the state had not devised adequate means for controlling it. The most significant activity of crown servants was revenue collection and its control was less than rudimentary. Crown made a substantial irregular income at the expense of both crown and peasants. Accounts of revenue collection in the nineteenth century still report that to the absence of revenue records, amounts were settled afresh each year through bargaining between individual tenants and crown servants, or village bead men and crown servants. Some customary context for the bargaining may have existed; figures like one-third to one-hair the crop arc occasionally mentioned. But without a system of records to impose some bounds on these proceedings and some method of ascertaining the Raj's share, the Raja was unable to control what his servants did.

In the absence of regular controls by accounting and receipts, a more rough-hewn technique, which one imaginative Maharaja described as a Persian Wheel, was used. The effective political community, those who wielded power and those who influenced them, was restricted to the twice-born castes, the castes traditionally admitted to the sacred tradition. Rajputs ruled, Brahmans and Vaishyas and Kayasths aided, advised and influenced them. In villages the effective political community was wider, as elsewhere in India, since local caste loaders and propertied men of the peasantry to a large extent ran their own affairs through panchayats.

A narrow political community influenced Maharajas or nobles, but failed over the centuries to create political institutions which could legitimize its place in the state. Brahmans exercised a positive influence as interpreters of the sacred tradition and its

requirements, their role at the great ceremonies which punctuate the life cycle and as spiritual advisers and moral guides to those who exercised public authority gave them a strategic advantage to affect what was or was not done. Brahmans were essential to Raj-tilak ceremonies, the ceremonies inducting a new Maharaja into his position. Representative of the order which guarded dharma, propriety in matters spiritual, ceremonial and human-they lent the sanction of tradition and theology. But if Brahmans could advise, they could not decide. They could not prevent the elevation of a Raja nor the pursuit of policies upon which be was bent, unless they united with other forces through the irregular but significant channel of palace intrigue. The Brahman order was united by the bond of caste and initiation into the high culture, but it was not the representative of a church as were the priests and princes of the medieval Roman Church. If one Brahman should refuse his services, there would always be another who would not. The actions of the state were not ultimately dependent upon Brahman sanctions since Brahmans had not a common consciousness or capacity to act. The struggles of a Becket or a Gregory are foreign to Indian history.

From their hold over the spiritual aspirations of rulers and men of substance, Brahmans constructed a formidable material domain. In most Rajput states, one-fifth of the land went to Brahmans, temples, bards and genealogists, largely by bequest of Maharajas and nobles.

The Brahmans also held privileges. They had a strong presumption to be tax exempt. "A king," says Manu, the law giver, "even though dying with want, must not receive any tax from a Brahman learned in the Vedas." Brahmans regularly resisted taxes on these traditional grounds. Their method of self-protection, when pushed to extremes, was dramatic, consistent with a caste ethic which discouraged a soldiery style, and theologically horrifying : they killed themselves, bringing down upon their oppressors the curse of having

killed a Brahman for which the penalties in future lives were exorbitant. Raja Brindaban Das of Khaodela, sorely pressed to meet some fiscal obligation, attempted to extract an extravagant special levy from his subjects, including Brahmans.

The Vaishyas influenced the state through their control of capital and skill in managing financial affairs. They acted as bankers for the crown and noblemen and as bureaucrats dealing with the central civil function of revenue collection. The deserts of Rajputana harbor one of India's greatest merchant classes, the so-called Marwaris. Carrying that name elsewhere in India regardless of whether Marwar (Jodhpur) or Jaipur or another state is their home, they control a significant amount of Indian commercial and industrial enterprise in Calcutta, Bombay and other state capitals. Some of the important names in Indian capitalism, Birla, Singhania, Podar and others spring from Rajasthan.

The origins of this merchant class are obscure, but the in accessibility of Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Bikaner, and the Shekhawati towns, surrounded by arid desert, probably made these areas attractive refuges for wealthy men bent on escaping the chaos of the eighteenth century. Keeping the military chests of the warring parties in the "time of troubles" and insuring goods shipments at high rates may have increased their wealth. Possibly the ascetic non-violent faith of Jainism, significant in Rajasthan since the twelfth century, nurtured them in a manner suggestive of Weber's thesis connecting capitalism to the protestant ethic.

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