

Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India

By Norbert Peabody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Pp. xiii + 191. £40.00 (hardback).

ISBN 0 521-46548-6

This book looks at the Rajasthani kingdom of Kota from the time of its establishment in the early 18th century to the beginning of the Colonial period in the early 19th century. In spite of this being an incredibly complicated subject, Norbert Peabody successfully analyses the varied elements that contributed to the construction of kingship at Kota. Just to name a few of these elements, they include the role of tutelary deities in the formation of kingship, the establishment of armies, the collection of taxes and the importance of attracting mercantile communities. Sources for these explorations range from paintings and court poetry to early British accounts of the kingdom.

The ultimate aim of this book is to show that a thorough understanding of the changes and interactions that occurred during the Colonial Period is not possible unless one rigorously studies the nature of the Pre-Colonial Indian state. An informed analysis of the Colonial encounter at Kota is only possible if viewed against the backdrop of Pre-Colonial Kota. Peabody's thesis leads to an exploration of problems connected with applying the Orientalist critique to South Asian Studies. In particular, he demonstrates how those scholars who adhere to the Orientalist critique of Colonial Indian history have not done sufficient research on Pre-Colonial native agency. Peabody identifies his approach as "post-Orientalist", because of his nuanced interest in Pre-Colonial factors when considering the history of the early Colonial encounter.

Previous research on pre-Colonial Indian states has often presented kingdoms as stable and slightly romanticized in order to act as a foil to the disruption and cultural misunderstandings imposed on these kingdoms by the British. Peabody criticises these works, blaming their adherence to Dumontian structuralism and the Hocartian critique of Dumont for the oversimplification of the pre-Colonial Indian state. Unlike these previous works (most famously *The Hollow Crown* by Nicholas Dirks) this book aims to show up the fissures and discontinuities that existed at pre-Colonial Kota. By doing this, Peabody shows how the early Colonial presence at Kota can be viewed as a continuation of a pre-existing set of discontinuities and not the outright cause of them.

The kingdom's tutelary deity is one case in point where such fissures occurred in pre-Colonial Kota. In 1719, Bhim Singh, the first king of Kota, received a Vallabha idol cast in gold while on pilgrimage at Mathura. He brought the idol back to Kota and installed it in the palace. Unfortunately, this gold idol held inferior status to the Vallabha sculpture down the road, in Kota's market place. While the gold image in the palace was man made, the superior Vallabha sculpture in the market place was one of the nine "navnidhi" or "divinely made" idols of the Vallabha sect. These nine idols operated as independent entities and were cared for by the nine direct descendants ("goswamis") of Vallabhacharya (the founder of the Vallabha sect). Navnidhi idols could own land in

different kingdoms, and because of their small portable nature, they could move from one location to another whenever it suited them. If a navnidhi image took up residence in a kingdom, and if that kingdom's economy faltered, the goswami in charge of that navnidhi could move it to a more prosperous kingdom. The authority of the inferior gold Vallabha image in Kota's palace was connected with the divinely made image residing in Kota's market place. Given the king's lack of control over the idol in the market place, establishing the gold Vallabha idol as his kingdom's tutelary deity perpetually exposed the kingdom to instability before the arrival of the British.

Another pre-Colonial structure explored by Peabody is land revenue. He considers a variety of agrarian land revenue systems that were practiced in Rajasthan during the pre-Colonial period. These different systems all placed varying levels of risk and responsibility on the peasantry and/or the landlord. Shouldering the responsibility of a bad harvest on the peasantry was problematic because peasants could simply abandon the estate where they worked. Alternatively, the landlord (in this case the king of Kota) clearly didn't want to bear the brunt of a bad harvest. One solution was to allow agents ("muquatdars") to bid a fixed sum to manage the land, half of which was paid to the king in advance. In this way, the king was guaranteed his revenue, but avoided the risk of a bad harvest. The muquatdars, in turn, would hoard grain to inflate prices, thus increasing the competition to bid on the management of royal land. Analysis of land management systems shows how Kota's agrarian economy generated revenue, and leads to a discussion of how this revenue was spent, particularly on Kota's military.

It is absolutely essential to look at pre-Colonial agrarian land revenue systems to understand kingship at Kota. The pivotal importance of this line of investigation leads Peabody to critique Nicholas Dirks' research on the south Indian kingdom of Pudukkottai. Describing Dirks' book, *The Hollow Crown*, as "fiscally innocent" (p.92), Peabody points out that Dirks' research does not consider the importance of land revenue at Pudukkottai in any depth. Instead, Dirks provides a distinctively undetailed analysis of pre-Colonial land revenue systems at Pudukkottai that envisages their agrarian economics as consensual and culturally consistent. Dirks does not devote any analysis to different possible forms of land management, nor does he consider the impact that land management had on the funding of armies, the prosperity of market economies and the general success of the land. Peabody ultimately labels Dirks as promoting a "raja-centric" view of kingship (p.110) that aligns his work with an older generation of anthropologists.

This book represents a growing body of scholarship which recognizes the importance of the Orientalist critique of South Asian Studies while exposing the areas which this critique unfortunately masks. All academic endeavors are interpretive, but it is important to base interpretations of the past on research rather than on current theoretical fashion.

JENNIFER HOWES
The British Library