Dressed to the Nines: Oriental Feudalism and the Outward Appearance of Subordination

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> Extravagantly rich and exotic come to mind when thinking of the bygone world of Indian royalty, yet almost all of the 565 princely states abruptly and peacefully came to an end in 1947. In fact, the dazzling princely dress had come to represent subordination to the Queen of Britain. Because Indian rulers were unable to perform the princely duties of defending their state under colonial rule, Indian royalty directed their excess resources to the consumption of luxury goods. These goods, most notably represented in their dress, came to symbolize the ruling class's increasing incompetence in the governing of their states.

The British Empire was full of contradictions, but nowhere more than in India. Notably, the concept of "two Indias" reflected the fact that the British Raj did not directly rule two-fifths of the continent.[1] While development was pushed on the directly ruled Raj, maintaining the status quo was the goal in the "princely states." However, in these seemingly anachronistic princely states, contradictions abounded. After the Indian revolt in 1857, the princely states came under the suzerainty of the British Crown, as the East Indian Company relinquished its power. In order to ensure that there would not be another revolt within the British Raj, the British built a system that was more hierarchical and autocratic, which ushered in a time of greater demarcation both racially and culturally. Important to this scheme were the princely states, many of which had backed the British Raj during the revolt, and who would be the bulwarks of the British Empire in India. Initially, the princely states had been brought under the indirect rule of the East Indian Company through the subsidiary treaty system, giving the British control over the princely states' foreign policy.[2] Instead of conquering these states, maintaining the goodwill of the princes became the essential policy of the British Raj.[3] Consequently, the British established a feudal system of gifting honours on the princes.[4] This feudal system was emblematized through the princes' traditional Indian regalia, which became a requirement of the conventional durbar etiquette under the British Crown. At the same time, the British believed that these princely rulers had to modernize both themselves and their states in order to conform to the British standards of "good" government. As such, the British used Oriental stereotypes to shape the fundamental building blocks of a feudal order in India, which was meant to both modernize and subordinate the traditional Oriental princes; accordingly, an irreconcilable dichotomous identity emerged for the Indian rulers.

Although the British were allied to the princely states, the British did not regard the native rulers as their equals. As Edward Said discusses in his well-known work *Orientalism*, the Orient existed for the Europeans as a place where Western civilization contrasted with the romanticized "other." Orientalism can be described as a Western institution to restructure, dominate, and rule

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[1] Ian Copland, "Princely States and the Raj," review of *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India* by Manu Bhagavan, *Economic and Political Weekly 39*, no 8 (Feb. 21-27 2004), 807

[2] Angma Dey Jhala. *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India*. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 8-9

[3] Ibid., 8

[4] Ibid., 9

the Orient.[5] Accordingly, in India, the British used Oriental stereotypes, such as despotism and splendor, to explain Indian behaviour as fundamentally different from the British. Instead of being equal allies, the princes needed guidance in order to mend their despotic ways. Accordingly, the British encouraged the princes to modernize because as the Viceroy Lord Curzon stated, "the native Chief has become, by our policy, an integral factor in the Imperial organisation of India… he must justify and not abuse the authority committed to him; he must be the servant as well as the master of his people."[6] Despite this push for more modern and humane rule, the British always believed that princely rulers were still too closely associated with Oriental methods of rule, which meant that they could never rule as honourably as the British in the Raj.[7]

Ultimately, in order to satisfy the Victorian imperial ideological *raison d'être*, the native rulers had to be guided from their traditional despotism into modernity, so the princes would be set on the European path of development. On this European path of progression, the British could assist the princely states' development to modernity.[8] Therefore, the British decided to create a feudal order in the princely states in order to ensure allegiance to the British Crown while also instituting a Eurocentric project of modernization. Key to the development of this civilizing mission was Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858 that assured the protection of the rights, privileges, religions, and traditions of the princes[9]:

> We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions… we shall sanction no encroachment on those of others. We shall respect the rights, dignity, and honour of native princes as our own; and we desire that they, as well as our own subjects, should enjoy that prosperity and that social advancement which can only be secured by internal peace and good government...[10]

Significantly, the Queen's proclamation guaranteed that annexation of princely states would no longer be a British policy. Instead, the Indian princes would be organized into ranks according to their significance.[11] Now that annexation was no longer a solution for "bad" government in the princely states, the native rulers had to be reformed and monitored in order to fulfill the Victorian civilizing mission. As such, this feudal relationship allowed the British to claim the right to approve the appointment of ministers, to arrange for the education of princes, and to advise the princes on the correct form of ruling.[12] Subsequently, political agents were placed within each princely state in order to monitor that the ruler's behavior was in accordance with British directives. These princes were to uphold certain moral standards in their rule, or else forfeit their position.[13] However, these states could not become too modernized or else British rule would become unnecessary.[14]

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[5] Edward W. Said, "Orientalism," *The British Empire*, ed. Jane Samson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61-63

[6] Sir Thomas Raleigh. *Lord Curzon in India: Being a Selection From His Speeches as Viceroy & Governor-General of India.* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906), 217

[7] Steven Patterson. *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 92

[8] Charles W. Nuckolls, "The Durbar Incident," *Modern Asian Studies 24,* no. 3 (July 1990), 531

[9] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 8

[10] A. B. Keith, *Speeches and Documents on Indian Policy 1750-1921* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 383-384

[11] Amin Jaffer. *Made for Maharajas: A Design Diary of Princely India* (New York: The Vendome Press, 2006), 15

[12] Urmila Phadnis. *Towards the Integration of Indian States, 1919-1947* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968), 16

[13] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 17

[14] Manu Bhagavan. *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8

Essentially, this new feudal order established in India represented a nostalgic opportunity for the British, since nineteenth century European society was transforming due to industrialism and individualism.[15] Thus, the princely states became nostalgic pleasure gardens where British dreams and fantasies could be fulfilled.

With the intention of developing feudalism, the British used Oriental stereotypes in order to cultivate princely loyalty. As such, the British developed the notion that in order to inspire allegiance from the native rulers, the British must appeal to the princes' Oriental love of pageantry and imagery. Lord Curzon fully believed in the power of these Orientalist assumptions, which for him meant that ritual would be the foundation of a stable British Empire.[16] He believed that "to the East, there is nothing strange, but something familiar and even sacred, in the practice that brings sovereigns into communion with their people in a ceremony of public solemnity and rejoicing, after they have succeeded to their high estate."[17] However, the British believed European symbolism to be too foreign for the Indian princes because of the British's belief that moving too quickly out of the feudal stage would create disorder and anarchy.[18] Thus, the symbols and rituals had to be appropriated from the Mughals in order to legitimize British paramountcy over the princes. Central to this process was the appropriation of the Mughal form of court administration and ceremony, the durbar. For this reason, the princely states' development had to be along oriental lines for a smooth transition into the modern world.[19]

However, the British did not fully understand or appreciate the Mughal symbols that they adopted. Most importantly they misunderstood the act of Mughal incorporation through gift giving during durbars as the act of subordination, to which they added European concepts of feudal pageantry.[20] Consequently, Britain's conception of her feudal past was brought to life in the establishment of the Order of the Star of India in 1861, which was a knighthood meant to consolidate the organization of the Indian ruling elite into a uniform hierarchy subordinated to British paramountcy.[21] Indian princes who had supported the British during the rebellion were rewarded this Star of India, which was the highest honour given to princes.[22] As such, princes were obliged to wear the Star of India at any social gathering with political significance due to the nature of hierarchical ranking of the princes in the new feudal system.[23] Female rulers, wives, sisters, and daughters were also included in this system of gifting honours through the award of the Order of the Crown of India, which they received for commendable acts of service.[24] Thus, the Star of India became an outward sign of the princes' subordinate role in the hierarchical feudal system that the British had established.

In 1877, the first Durbar was held to celebrate Queen Victoria's new titulature as the Empress of India. Ultimately, this Durbar represented the fulfillment of the European Orientalist dream to

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[15] Patterson, *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India,* 93

[16] Alan Trevithick, "Some Structural and Sequential Aspects of the British Imperial Assemblages at Delhi: 1877-1911," *Modern Asian Studies 24*, no. 3 (July 1990), 567

[17] Raleigh, *Lord Curzon in India,* 289

[18] Manu Bhagavan. *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17

[19] Bernard S. Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 122-123

[20] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 16

[21] Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India*, 18

[22] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 16

[23] The Statutes of the most exalted order of the star of India. *Foreign and Commonwealth Office Collection* (1866), 11

[24] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 16

dominate the East.[25] Significantly, the Durbar was the culmination of Lord Canning's, who was the first Viceroy of India, durbars held immediately following the rebellion, which began this process of feudalization through the gifts of special clothes and titles. His goal, fulfilled by the Durbar of 1877, was to fill the Mughal seat of power and adopt its trappings of authority, in order to legitimize the British's authority in India.[26] Lytton, who organized the Durbar in 1877, believed in the Orientalist assumption that the power of ritual would uniquely appeal to the native mind in a way that did not appeal to British minds.[27] For this reason, appropriate etiquette, such as ceremonial dress, was an essential political element of the ritual.[28] In order to lend both grandeur and mystique to the British imperial power, the princes were incorporated into the ceremony. In addition, the princes represented the anachronistic embodiments of the past, which contrasted with British modernity.[29] Thus, the Queen and her successors demanded that the princes wear their traditional royal garb and headgear, which represented the romantic Oriental notion from which the British had constructed their ceremony.[30]

Of particular importance, in a time when the British were demarcating themselves from the Indians, was the princes' elaborate and free-formed durbar dress, which represented the British conception of the Indian's disregard for morality against the structured European dress that represented British moral integrity and superiority.[31] The Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, illustrates this Oriental expectation of Indian dress through her description of the curious, but beautiful, dress of a noble from Hyderabad:

> His loose 'Turkish' trousers were striped red and green. His short coat was scarlet velvet and gold. His jewels were wonderful: a great belt of them round his waist, another across his shoulder, bracelets of magnificent flat diamonds round his arms, rings of immense stones on his fingers, and other splendid trifles in various directions. Then his hat… it was covered with gems: round the edge of the brim… a row of large pearls, while more jewels covered all the rest of it. His sword-handle was beautiful, too…[32]

In contrast, Lord Curzon's wife, in appraising a native prince was surprised to find that one of the richest princes, the Nizam of Hyderabad, did not wear "any of the gorgeous ornaments usually inseparable from Oriental majesty."[33] Thus, the Durbars' symbols and rituals were designed to fulfill the British perception of Oriental fantasies and feudal order, so this meant that the rituals had not Indian but British meanings and that any deviation from them was unacceptable and would be perceived as a direct assault on imperial beliefs.[34]

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[25] Nuckolls, "The Durbar Incident," 530

[26] Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India,* 17

[27] Trevithick, "Some Structural and Sequential Aspects of the British Imperial Assemblages at Delhi: 1877-1911," 563

[28] Nuckolls, The Durbar Incident," 533

[29] Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India,* 19

[30] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 22

[31] Ibid., 98

[32] Marchioness of Dufferin & Ava. *Our Viceregal Life in India: Selections From My Journal 1884-1888, vol. 2* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1889), 205-206

[33] Mary Curzon, "The Hyderabad Journal," *Lady Curzon's India: Letters of a Vicereine*, ed. John Bradley (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), 138

[34] Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India,* 74

Because of the imperial Durbars, the Indian princes were brought into competition with each other through clothing and objects worn on the body in order to show their cultural sophistication.[35] Status symbols had become important in the demonstration of the princes' political power because native rulers no longer practiced their real duty as rulers who went to war and used diplomacy with other states.[36] This visual self-representation of the Indian rulers, which had become the compulsory durbar dress, consisted of turbans, robes, shoes, swords, and magnificent jewelry, including the Star of India. Through their calculated appearance the princes interacted with subjects, other rulers, and also the imperial British power.[37] Moreover, in order to win favour from or pledge allegiance to the British Crown, the Indian princes gave gifts of jewels to the British monarchs.[38] In addition, European manufacturers marketed their products to the Indian rulers. These European manufacturers played an important part in the creation of the "other" because they created the costumes developed for the durbar rituals in order to place the Indian princes into a feudal hierarchy.[39] Subsequently, princely families became clients of the European couture houses. France became the favorite because Indian princes were well received by the French as opposed to the British, who reminded the princes of their subordinate positions.[40] For this reason, Indian princes began to emulate Western behaviour and culture, which the British Raj encouraged to an extent in order to build the princes' loyalty.[41] As such, native rulers had western educations, either in Europe or through European tutors, and wore European style clothing.[42]

With the increase in westernized behavior and consumption, some Indian princes took to wearing European style metal crowns in addition to their durbar regalia, which threatened the British feudal order. In order to stress the princes' subordination, the British forbade the princes to wear anything that resembled a European crown.[43] In *The Times*, published in 1907, an entry observed the increasing westernization and modernization of the princes:

> If we turn first to the ruling Princes, we find, indeed, a great outward change; much of the barbarism of Oriental royalty has disappeared; the principal chiefs have received from their English tutors something more than a veneer of Western civilization; they are fully able to appreciate the advantage of a British suzerainty as compared with that of any other European Power…[44]

As a product of the subsidiary treaty system, the princes could redirect their resources from defense to acquiring luxury goods.[45] However, the British realized that increased modernization for the princes only offered the extravagant rulers a new outlet for travelling and buying cars. So, though the British pushed the native princes to modernize, the princes, because of their nature, would only find new outlets for their despotism. Fundamentally, the problem was that the princes were becoming foreigners in their own country, which meant they could lose their legitimacy as rulers; therefore, the

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[35] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 55-56

[36] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 16

[37] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 12

[38] Ibid., 42

[39] Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," 130

[40] Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and Aesthetics in Princely India,* 19

[41] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 8

[42] Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," 133

[43] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 17

[44] Ganga Singh, "The Indian Princes And The British Raj," *Times*, July 23, 1907, accessed Oct. 2, 2012.

[45] Jaffar, *Made for Maharajas,* 8

entire reason for the princely regime would be undermined.[46] For this reason, Lord Curzon issued the Curzon Circular that stated that princes needed permission for foreign travel because the British expected the princes to concern themselves with matters of state instead of with personal pleasures.[47]

In 1911, the last Durbar was held in order to, again, fulfill the British fantasies of Indian traditions. As usual, the princes were supposed to be dressed in their durbar garbs, or traditional Indian regalia, before the English monarchs. However, the Gaekwad of Baroda, Sayaji Rao, wore plain white clothing, no jewelry, and he wore no sword, which were conventions dictated by the British, but most significantly he did not wear the Order of the Star of India. Thus, in his appearance alone, the Gaekwad defied the assumptions and expectations of the British.[48] The reason behind this defiance was the Gaekwad's realization that the princes were only used for British legitimization and would be always controlled regardless of their actions.[49] Baroda, ranked second in the overall hierarchy, was considered the most progressive of all the princely states, an example that other states should emulate. Despite the Gaekwad's high standing and modernized state, Lord Curzon's circular made clear that the prince did not hold any real sovereign power.[50] Indian princes had to conform to the European constructed Oriental images, because once the Europeans identified an Indian tradition any deviance from it was seen as an act of rebellion and thus it had to be punished. As such, the Indian princes had to conform to the European understanding of the Indian world within its simplified rules and orders.[51] For this reason, Indian princes were required to wear traditional Indian garb, so that British conceptions and fantasies could be fulfilled.[52]

Although the princely states were indirectly ruled, Britain's influence defined the princes' identities and later the fate of their states after Independence in 1947. Through the use of feudalism, the British created anachronistic autocratic governments that for the most part quickly and peacefully acceded to the Indian subcontinent under democratic rule. As a result of the subsidiary treaty, the native princes no longer had the military power to defend their right to rule against the pressure of the Indian National Congress. In addition, the autocratic princes, whose power had been always ensured by the British, were unable to compete with the new political freedoms that democracy promised in India. Thus, the subordinate nature of the princely states eventually stifled the princes' capability to rule despite their attempts to ensure their place on the throne through modernizing both themselves and their states.

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[47] Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India,* 73

[48] Ibid., 61

[49] Ibid., 73

[50] Ibid., 47-48

[51] Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," 163

[52] Ibid., 126

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