




INTRODUCTION

Princely cities in South Asia, c. 1850–1950: themes and perspectives

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Recent years have seen a surge of academic interest in the making of modern South Asian cities. Much of this scholarly literature has focused on rethinking the nature of colonial urbanism in British India. A growing body of revisionist historical writing has sought to challenge the long-entrenched view that colonial cities were largely European constructs in which Indians did not exercise any agency. In particular, they have shown how a range of Indian actors – from wealthy magnates to subaltern social groups – shaped the material life, urban spaces and public culture of the colonial city.¹ However, this historical revisionism has limited itself to a critique of older models of colonial urbanism by primarily focusing on the colonial cities directly governed by the British. Scholars have continued to remain fixated on the major centres of colonial power, namely, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Delhi and Lahore. As a result, they have paid scant attention to the cities located in the five-hundred-odd states nominally ruled by Indian princes. The result has been a curiously one-sided historiography that has avoided any systematic exploration of urbanism in much of the subcontinent outside British India.²

The economic and political importance of the princely states within the history of South Asia is undeniable. At the time of independence, these states covered nearly half of the subcontinent. For instance, Hyderabad in the Deccan totalled nearly 82,000 square miles in area. Baroda, in western India, contained nearly three-fourths the population of its four neighbouring British districts combined. Yet, princely states remain understudied, with their absence from the scholarship

¹For overviews of this historiography, see J. Nair, ‘Beyond nationalism: modernity, governance and a new urban history for India’, *Urban History*, 36 (2009), 327–41; E.L. Beverley, ‘Colonial urbanism and South Asian cities’, *Social History*, 36 (2011), 482–97; D. Bhattacharya, ‘The Indian city and its “restive publics”’: a review essay’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2020), 1–31.

²There exist numerous antiquarian and popular works on individual princely cities. But the academic scholarship on princely urbanism is notably sparse. For notable exceptions to this generalization, see H. Spodek, ‘Urban politics in the local kingdoms of India: a view from the princely capitals of Saurashtra under British rule’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 7 (1973), 253–75; M. Bhagavan, ‘Demystifying the “ideal progressive”’: resistance through mimicked modernity in princely Baroda, 1900–1913’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 35 (2001), 385–409; J. Nair, *Mysore Modern: Rethinking the Region under Princely Rule* (Minneapolis, 2011); and E. Beverley, *Hyderabad, British India, and the World: Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty, c. 1850–1950* (Cambridge, 2015).

on South Asian cities being particularly pronounced. This collection of articles seeks to redress this glaring scholarly neglect and reconsider the urban history of South Asia in the age of British imperialism.

Just as urban development in British India was concentrated in its principal capital cities, so too did cities such as Hyderabad, Baroda, Jaipur and Mysore become focal points for princely urbanism. Some royal cities – notably, Hyderabad – had long stood as capitals of once vigorous and vibrant precolonial urban centres; others – such as Jaipur – were more recent creations. Yet, for all their differences, many of these cities were formally governed by systems of indigenous political sovereignty that maintained an uneasy relationship with colonial power. Princely urbanism was thus shaped by norms and practices that antedated British rule in South Asia and continued to endure even after Indian royal houses were subjugated by colonial power. Equally, princely urbanism was also – consciously, in some instances – influenced by civic examples in continental Europe, the Middle East and the United States. Focusing on princely cities can thus yield rich insights into the ways in which pre-colonial idioms as well as globally circulating discourses and practices of urbanity informed and inflected the development of modern Indian urbanism outside the core areas of colonial rule.

However, it is not intended to suggest that princely cities in South Asia developed entirely autonomously of colonial power. On the contrary, ideas and technologies associated with the ‘colonial modern’ influenced the development of princely cities in important ways. On the one hand, Indian rulers used their capitals and prominent urban centres as sites to display their commitment to colonial visions of modernity. They invested in modern civic infrastructure – railways, bridges, electricity, sanitary systems – that drew on models and expertise from British India and Europe. On the other hand, there developed in these cities forms of urban public culture that closely resembled those found in major colonial centres. Princely cities too possessed their own voluntary associations, learned societies, universities and newspapers. They also became the sites of novel encounters and experiments that came to define the experience of urban modernity in South Asia.

These princely cities, with their distinctive urban identities and practices, constitute the primary focus of this Special Issue.³ In particular, the case-studies gathered here focus on some of the major cities of princely India and offer valuable insights into the dynamics of princely urbanism. Hyderabad, for instance, is distinctive as a site for both British and princely jurisdictional spheres, offering an opportunity to explore the complex – and often tense – relationship between these two authorities, and between competing ideas of the urban. Mysore, likewise, illustrates a more hybrid urban form, combining elements of both the princely and the colonial. The examples of Jaipur and Bombay, meanwhile, suggest that ideas of the ‘modern’ bled across political borders to shape forms of urban modernity in both princely and British India.

³The papers included in this volume were presented at a workshop entitled ‘Princely cities: towards a new history of urban South Asia’, held at the Centre of Urban History, University of Leicester, on 8–9 April 2019.

In the opening article, Eric Beverley identifies three key characteristics of princely urbanism. First, royal cities witnessed ‘state-directed urban planning conceived in an idiom of patrimonial sovereignty’. Their rulers pursued civic redevelopment in ways largely untrammelled by institutional accountability to local stakeholders. Second, to a far greater degree than in colonial India, civic-minded princes sought to braid globally circulating ideas with local idioms in the development of their royal capitals. Their cities also became sites for urban experiments based on transnational planning expertise. Third, princely cities were also notable for their ‘fragmented and overlapping forms of property’, which gave rise to diverse claims and contestations over urban space.⁴

Beverley’s analysis shows how these features shaped urban development in early twentieth-century Hyderabad. In this princely domain, there were a welter of competing authorities operating at different levels each with their own set of historically grounded claims on urban lands. As urbanization gathered pace towards the end of the nineteenth century, the city’s ruling authorities embarked on forms of urban planning and development that reflected the workings of patrimonial sovereignty. Although the state’s civic schemes bore some institutional resemblances to colonial models, the logic of their functioning was quite different. For instance, although Hyderabad had a municipal corporation and a City Improvement Board (modelled on the urban improvement trusts in colonial India), its members were royal appointees. Moreover, while there was an attempt over time to accord representation to diverse interest groups, this was not paralleled by an entrenchment of the elective principle.

Urban planning in Hyderabad simultaneously drew on globally circulating ideas about the ‘sanitary city’ as well as local conditions and traditions of construction. The City Improvement Board (CIB) and the Town Planning Department (TPD) sought to develop the city’s infrastructure along ‘modern’ lines as well as pursue ‘welfarist’ housing schemes for the poor.

Significantly, the Hyderabad state afforded opportunities to experts who were critical of the models of colonial urbanism pursued in British India. Notably, towards the end of World War I urban planners in Hyderabad invited Patrick Geddes to develop plans for a new state-sponsored public university. The move was prompted by the renowned Scottish polymath’s growing involvement in designing civic plans, both in British India and other princely states. As Beverley notes, Geddes’ plans for Osmania University, which he worked out in tandem with the state’s architect Mohammed Fayazuddin, adapted ‘global development models to suit the context of Hyderabad’. Accordingly, Geddes sought to institutionalize a complementary and reciprocal relationship between the proposed university and the peasant cultivators of the city’s agricultural hinterland. ‘This vision of Osmania’s role in shaping an “agricultural public” on the outskirts of the city, and its explicit modelling on global sources’, Beverley writes, ‘shares key features with CIB and TPD state urbanism in the emphasis on patrimonial reciprocity situated in an internationalist framework.’⁵

⁴Beverley, ‘Beyond colonial urbanism’.

⁵*Ibid.*

However, it is in Beverley's discussion of the internal spatial economy of Hyderabad that we can clearly discern the distinctive logics of princely urbanism. Unlike colonial cities, where precolonial tenures had been successfully subordinated to the regime of property rights instituted by British power, the exercise of patrimonial sovereignty in Hyderabad had to contend with multiple registers of property ownership that claimed legitimacy and legality. The internally 'layered' nature of property rights in this princely state came to the fore in fractious disputes between the Nizam's officials and their British counterparts as they sought to reconcile 'jurisdictional differences' in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad.

The complex and contested jurisdictional relationship between Nizami Hyderabad and British Secunderabad is further explored in the articles by Benjamin Cohen and Yamini Krishna. Cohen examines the efforts to conserve the famous Hussain Sagar tank in late nineteenth-century Hyderabad. He shows how, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, 'a combination of urban growth, bureaucratic reforms and specialized knowledge laid the groundwork for attention to focus on the condition of the tank'. Cohen's analysis focuses on two levels. First, he uses official conservation reports that were commissioned in the 1890s to delineate the range of classes and power relations that evolved around the Hussain Sagar. He notes how the tank, which had been in existence for well over three centuries, was utilized by different social classes, from the washer folk, toddy tappers and shepherds who earned their livelihood on its shores to the rich aristocrats who built palatial waterfront homes around it. It was also affected by a range of sites dotted around it – in particular, a Muslim cemetery as well as local Hindu shrines – whose effluents flowed into the tank. Second, Cohen highlights how the diversity of the social classes that had access to the Hussain Sagar made it hard for official authorities – both Hyderabad and British – to control and discipline its users. Following the recommendations of a committee set up in 1890, attempts were made to police the tank by employing watchmen. Co-operation between the Nizam's administration and the British government led to the creation of a new force. But 'shared power brought shared problems'. In particular, it proved hard to reconcile the different juridical authorities, both Hyderabad and British, that sought to enforce their writ around the tank. Officials on both sides soon acknowledged that the diversity of stakeholders and jurisdictions around the tank 'made enforcement next to impossible'. Unsurprisingly, official attempts to regulate the use of the Hussain Sagar 'were ultimately unsuccessful'.⁶

Yamini Krishna's article on cinema in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad draws attention to another kind of space that was marked by jurisdictional conflicts between princely and the colonial practices of urban modernity. In the inter-war decades, cinema in Hyderabad and Secunderabad came to define a new space of public sociability that threatened to undermine colonial social hierarchies. The twin cities had contrasting cultures, one reflecting the princely ideology of patrimonialism, the other the colonial vision of a racially ordered society. Cinematic exhibition and consumption in Hyderabad was a multi-lingual affair, with Urdu, Telugu and Marathi films dominating the market. Secunderabad, the largest military cantonment in South India, mostly catered to tastes of the British

⁶Cohen, 'Class, place, and power'.

civilians and soldiers, with films being imported from the United States, Britain and Europe.

The jurisdictional conflicts arose over the protocols and practices governing princely access to public entertainments held in the cantonment. The Nizam and other members of the Hyderabad aristocracy frequently visited the British Cinema, the principal theatre in the cantonment. Their behaviour on these occasions triggered controversy and conflict between British officials in the cantonment and the Nizam's administration. This prompted the British to consider various steps to restrict the Nizam and his associates from visiting the cantonment cinema, which they viewed as a threat to the power structure and racial boundaries in the cantonment. However, as the Nizam was the supreme power in his state and the cantonment itself stood on land that had been let out to the British government, the colonial authorities were unable to restrict the movements of the Nizam and his courtiers. Importantly, too, Krishna argues that the British inability to do so stemmed from the economic dependence of British capital in the cantonment on the Nizam's bounty. Cinema exhibition in Secunderabad was not financially viable without the presence of attendees from Hyderabad.

Jurisdictional differences between the princely urban and the colonial urban in Hyderabad–Secunderabad also came to the fore in conflicts over urban space in the cantonment. There were frequent negotiations between Hyderabad officials and the British 'over land, rights of access to specific spaces and maintenance grants given by the Nizam'. In many instances, the Nizam's state claimed back land in the British cantonment. The cantonment officials, for their part, were prone to rejecting these demands, citing 'strategic' or 'sanitary' reasons. When they did cede land to the Nizam, it was to 'reduce the administrative burden' or when they were satisfied that their own business interests would remain unaffected. Interestingly, as Krishna notes, 'ideas of hygiene and etiquette were repeatedly invoked in these discussions'. Implicit in these conflicts was the idea that the colonial modern would be undermined by the 'uncivilized' princely order. The British authorities were also concerned about the potential implications of allowing the Nizam's police force to exercise their jurisdictional authority over cinemas frequented by British soldiers. In other words, 'The norms of the princely state were not considered suitable or applicable to Europeans.'⁷

At another level, however, such perceived constitutive differences between princely and colonial urbanism did not preclude the emergence of hybrid forms forged through their mutual interaction. Janaki Nair's article on the making of what she terms the 'monarchical modern' in the royal city of Mysore argues that princely urbanism represented a creative amalgam of sovereign power and the techniques and practices of modern governmentality. This braiding together of two modalities of power that are conventionally regarded as antithetical suffused 'the monumental and the quotidian' as well as the 'built form and performative practice' of princely Mysore. Nair historicizes the 'monarchical modern' by exploring four moments, running from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.⁸

⁷Krishna, 'Going to the cinema'.

⁸Nair, 'Monarchical modern'.

Each of these historical moments was defined by a specific logic. The first, which Nair terms the ‘sanitizing moment’, crystallized in the context of fears about epidemic diseases in the late nineteenth century. Saliiently, the attempts to fashion a modern city through new practices of urban planning sought to affirm and uphold pre-existing caste-based hierarchies. Nair’s archival materials offers plenty of evidence about how officials in the state administration sought to preserve caste boundaries in their redevelopment of the city. ‘Measures for the protection from disease thus equalled those protecting against caste pollution’, Nair drily notes. As a consequence, ‘the reassertion of social difference over-rode the possibility of creating a more secularized space, by which class would replace caste’.⁹

The second logic that Nair identifies – ‘botanizing’ Mysore – points to yet another facet of princely urbanism, one that allowed the sovereign working with powerful bureaucrats and technical experts to exert their personalized authority on the creation of aestheticized landscapes. Nair highlights the key role played in this regard by Mysore’s powerful Diwan Mirza Ismail and the economic botanist Gustav Hermann Krumbiegel. The latter, in particular, combined the roles of ‘a landscape gardener, town planner and even architect, prized for this aesthetic sensibilities, and for unseating traditions of flower and plant growing that were well known and practised for centuries’. Under Krumbiegel’s supervision, the urban landscape of Mysore came to reflect a new vision, one that privileged visual pleasure and ‘focused on the lawn as a vast open green space that would enhance the sculptural qualities of buildings, particularly in the Palace compound’.¹⁰

Swift to discern the economic potential of these developments, the powerful bureaucrats who administered the state – in particular, Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya and Mirza Ismail – invested in projects of ‘ornamentalism’ dedicated to the ‘gastronomy of the eye’. This took many forms. New Palaces were constructed for members of the royal family; the acquisition of public land for private aristocratic homes; and the beautification of these opulent dwellings. Although there was public criticism of such measures, Mysore officials justified these measures by pointing to their economic benefits in the form of enhanced tourism. In turn, the pursuit of the aesthetic imperative also reframed the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects. This was reflected in the fourth logic of Mysore’s urbanism that Nair identifies as the ‘moment of spectacularizing’. On the one hand, the Maharaja perambulated the city on major religious or civic occasions; on the other hand, the people too began to visit the royal Palace on various occasions. Accordingly, new claims were made about Mysore’s putative antiquity as a royal city. In sum, then, ‘Mysore’s landscape spoke of a new narrative contract between people and Palace, mediated powerfully by the bureaucracy, which negotiated multiple new demands being placed on the Palace, as well as emerging demands for a right to the city’.¹¹

The role of bureaucratic expertise in the fashioning of princely urbanism is further illustrated in Garima Dhabhai’s article on princely urbanism in Jaipur. Her account highlights the contribution of Mirza Ismail, whose tenure as prime

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

minister during the rule of Sawai Man Singh II was influential for Jaipur's development in the mid-twentieth century. As in Mysore, princely urbanism in this Rajput state saw bureaucratic expertise playing a key role in refashioning the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects. As she notes, 'Mirza Ismail introduced a new language of urban "improvement" partly attributable to European urban planning and partly to nascent ideals of nationalist development.'¹²

However, Dhabhai locates Jaipur's urban modernity within a longer genealogy dating back to its founding by Sawai Jai Singh II in the eighteenth century. She shows how the city's development was structured by the interplay between three elements: capital, infrastructure and knowledge. In the first century of its existence, 'networks of astronomical knowledge, Vaishnavism and mercantile capital' were crucial to the city's growth and its attendant cultural representations. Colonial modernity in the nineteenth century imprinted a new visual grammar on the urban fabric. British officials – notably, Swinton Jacob and Thomas Hedley – used Jaipur as a stage on which to display their expertise and pedagogic ideas. The emergence of new forms of bureaucratic authority, and the rise of English as the language of administration, weakened the power of the city's aristocratic Rajput clans. Royal sovereignty too was recast, presented as transcendental and timeless even as its real power was 'circumscribed within the new political economic order'. By the inter-war years, the logic of colonial capitalism also began to transform economic relations within the city and gave rise to a new 'bourgeoisie' that invoked the language of nationalism and democracy. Largely dominated by the Hindu upper castes, this bourgeoisie backed the modernizing thrust of Mirza Ismail as he set about reordering Jaipur's built environment.

Dhabhai's analysis of the long history of princely urbanism in Jaipur highlights some key themes of this Special Issue. First, her article shows how some royal cities possessed recognizably 'modern' features well before the onset of colonialism. Second, as in the case of Hyderabad and Mysore, colonial modernity in nineteenth-century Jaipur was shaped by the interplay of sovereign power and bureaucratic governmentality. Equally, it simultaneously displayed the aestheticizing impulses of ornamental Orientalism and the global discourses of sanitary modernity. Third, the emergence of new social classes within the princely city triggered a struggle for power with entrenched precolonial forms of aristocratic authority. In Jaipur, the power of the Rajput clans was displaced by the growth of the new upper-caste Hindu bourgeoisie. Indeed, as Dhabhai notes, Man Singh II, Jaipur's last sovereign, 'became a property owner and reverted to litigation to claim land in his own city'.¹³

The final article in this special issue shows how princely urbanism influenced the dominant colonial cities of British India. Kate Boehme focuses on the ways in which capital flows and investments by the princely states contributed to the growth of Bombay's economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Influential mercantile groups in colonial Bombay 'were closely invested in the internal economies of the princely states'. Boehme shows how princely states 'provided particular avenues for resource acquisition and investment that were open to Indian business communities but shut to their European rivals'. Conversely, Indian

¹²Dhabhai, 'Sovereign dreams and bureaucratic strategies'.

¹³*Ibid.*

princes and their agents invested in Bombay's financial, commercial and property markets. Indian princely states 'retained both a financial and physical presence in the city, investing in property and business, encouraging the spread of their home institutions into Bombay, and employing Bombay banks and agency houses'.¹⁴ Moreover, Indian rulers frequently travelled to colonial Bombay where they savoured the pleasures of new forms of leisure and recreation. They were often invited to attend major ceremonial and social events that dotted the calendar of British India. Many princes built palatial mansions in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Madras.¹⁵

Boehme's analysis of the princely presence in colonial Bombay 'seeks to blur the boundaries of the "bounded" colonial city within South Asia's urban historiography'. In the process, her article prompts us to rethink the conceptual divide between 'colonial' and 'princely' urbanism. By drawing attention to the cross-cutting linkages between British India and the princely states – simultaneously, financial, commercial and cultural – Boehme's account underscores the need to study the mutually constitutive relationship between 'princely' and 'colonial' urbanism.

Taken together, the essays in this Special Issue seek to compare and contrast princely and colonial India even as they simultaneously highlight the importance of cross-border connections for the development of urbanism in both contexts. They also examine how specific practices were conceived as 'traditional' and consider the role played by such ideas in shaping forms of princely urbanism in the modern period. In this regard, this Special Issue also points to the need for greater dialogue between scholars of the princely modern and those who study early modern and medieval urbanism. We hope that this foray will stimulate further research to tease out the links between the modern and earlier iterations of urbanism in princely spaces in order to illuminate processes of long-term change.

Lastly, as already noted above, the articles included in this Special Issue predominantly focus on the larger cities of princely India. In part, this reflects the research specialisms of those who participated in the initial workshop that made possible this collection. However, it is also a result of the current state of play with regard to the scholarship on princely cities. As in the case of the premier metropolitan centres in colonial India, the historiography on princely urbanism has tended to focus mostly on a few prominent states.¹⁶ Perhaps this is simply a consequence

¹⁴Boehme, 'Princely urbanism and the colonial city'.

¹⁵Here, Boehme's work resonates with Beverley's article in this collection, which dwells on the significance of Hyderabad Estate in Bombay's highly sought after Malabar Hill district. The Nizam had purchased this property in 1909, in a neighbourhood dominated by the residences of a number of other Indian princes. In the 1920s, the land became the focus of fractious litigation. The Nizam's lawyers sought to uphold Hyderabad legal norms in defending its status as a *waqf* property. In the process, Beverley argues, they 'introduced different legal rationalities and historical practices that open up spaces for thinking about property tenures in colonial cities'. Beverley, 'Beyond colonial urbanism'.

¹⁶States such as Baroda, Hyderabad and Mysore undeniably feature especially prominently in the literature on princely states. See, for example, D. Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s* (New Delhi, 2002); M. Pernau, *The Passing of Patrimonialism: Politics and Political Culture in Hyderabad, 1911–1948* (Delhi, 2000); J. Manor, *Political Change in an Indian State: Mysore, 1917–1955* (New Delhi, 1977); B. Hettne, *The Political Economy of Indirect Rule: Mysore, 1881–1947* (London, 1978).

of the availability of primary sources. But it may equally be an outcome of more complex factors. Rulers of larger and wealthier states – for instance, Hyderabad and Mysore – invested more resources in developing modern forms of urban infrastructure and improving the ‘splendour’ and aesthetic profile of their cities. In these states, discourses and practices of urban planning and improvement were far more prominent than in smaller states. At any rate, there is clearly a need for more work on smaller urban centres and other urban forms such as towns, villages and ports. Moreover, we need to pay greater attention to urbanism in smaller princely states, which differed from that found in the larger ones. Without the larger populations and greater resources of the big princely states, attention in these smaller principalities was perhaps predominantly restricted to enhancing the splendour of the royal Palace and its environs. We need further work that can illuminate these distinctions and explore the internal diversity of princely South Asia.