

BOOK REVIEW

Harrison Akins. *Conquering the Maharajas: India's Princely States and the End of Empire, 1930–1950*

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Conquering the Maharajas seeks to offer new insights into the study of the Indian princely states and their fate after 1947. The introduction begins by rejecting long-standing stereotypes of the Indian princes and informs readers that the book reconstructs the story of the integration of the princely states into India and Pakistan “as the political actors involved would have seen it” (5). Akins divides these actors into the “four perspectives” of “British paramountcy, the princely order, the nationalist movement and the states’ subjects” (6–7). Akins suggests the book is a history of “clashing ideas of sovereignty” in the highly consequential decades between 1930 and 1950. He then introduces the idea of “indirect rule,” but does not make any particular claim regarding how the book contributes to the extant scholarship on the topic. Next, he proposes that the use of force by Indian nationalists to integrate the princely states indicates that India’s nationalist leaders “frequently proved willing to sacrifice their democratic principles” in order to assert the sovereignty of the postcolonial nation-state (14). This argument is repeated throughout the text, although one fails to grasp how the overthrowing of autocratic monarchies in order to establish a constitutional democratic republic represents a betrayal of democratic principles. In the historiographical section that seeks to establish the stakes of the book vis-à-vis the extant scholarship, Akins claims *Conquering the Maharajas* is novel in two regards: in its emphasis on the years after 1947 and in adding much-needed “historical context” (16). Extant studies, we are told, “do not address the clashing ideas of sovereignty at play in the early years of Indian and Pakistani independence” (15).

In this way, Akins misrepresents recent scholarship on the fate of the princely states after 1947. We learn that recent work by Eric Beverley, Margrit Pernau, Taylor Sherman, Mridu Rai, Srinath Raghavan, and yours truly, among others who go unmentioned, fails to provide “the historical context of Princely India’s relations with British colonial authorities or an analysis of the broader scope of clashing ideas of sovereignty and the implications for the state-building process in South Asia” (16). The *raison d’être* of *Conquering the Maharajas* is thus “a more complete understanding” of these topics (17). The problem with dismissing this scholarship, rather than engaging with it, is that all of these works actually do engage precisely with these themes and associated questions. Ultimately, this straw man approach is rendered moot, but perhaps not insignificant, as Akins does not in any discernible manner follow through on making up for the alleged historiographical lacunae. Indeed, only the perspectives of the most senior British officials are examined at length. The princes and Indian nationalists are scattered throughout the text, but they remain unidimensional characters whose perspectives, even in the chapters dedicated to them, are almost entirely sourced from imperial and colonial archives, very often those of the intelligence and security

services. The subjects of the princely states are only cursorily dealt with or ignored entirely. *Conquering the Maharajas* is essentially a work of imperial history, although neither the introduction nor the three chapters on paramountcy, federation, and interwar constitutional debates account for the major relevant works of imperial historiography (e.g., by Arthur Berriedale Keith, Reginald Coupland, or R.J. Moore). There is very little at all in the first five chapters of the book that has not already been examined, and to greater effect, by the standard-bearing books on the princely states by Ian Copland or Barbara Ramusack.

The last four chapters of the book consist of case studies of the four princely states that were sites of some sort of violent confrontation after 1947: Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kalat. Of the more than 560 princely states, most acceded to India or Pakistan without much violence. The decision to focus on the exceptional cases is left unexplained, nor do we learn much about why these cases turned out to be exceptional. The first five chapters of the book that provide the historical context do not focus on these four states. The chapter on Hyderabad begins with some general observations about the state prior to 1947, but mostly we are told (once again) about fruitless negotiations, an “intractable” Nizam who came under the sway of the Muslim “fanatics” of the Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen, “Razakar atrocities,” and a deterioration of “law and order” that necessitated military intervention by the Government of India. The chapter ignores recent scholarship by A.G. Noorani (and others), while also uncritically reproducing the official version of events. This is old wine in a new bottle. In any event, it tells us little about the “clashing ideas of sovereignty” and the other themes proposed in the introduction. We are told, for example, that Pingle Venkat Rama Reddy, Hyderabad’s Deputy Prime Minister and a participant in important constitutional negotiations, was, according to one British lawyer, “a bag of lard incapable of understanding or speaking English” (157). What we are not told is Reddy’s “perspective” nor are we given an analysis of his ideas relating to sovereignty in late colonial India.

That *Conquering the Maharajas* consists largely of the curation of content in search of an argument may help to explain why the book struggles to meet the standards expected of peer-reviewed scholarship. Many paragraphs throughout the book lack citations where one would normally expect to find them. More care could have also been taken to ensure the originality of language and to engage with the extant scholarship in good faith. Ultimately, *Conquering the Maharajas* misses the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to our understanding of an important topic in the history of modern South Asia.