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# HIERARCHY AND MOBILITY STATES AND CASTES IN COLONIAL INDIA<sup>1</sup>

Dick Kooiman

## *Abstract*

In pre-British times the Indian states were continuously involved in mutual conflict. With the gradual extension of British rule this political instability was brought under control and the British tried to keep the states in what they thought to be their due place. This suppression of an originally dynamic political system greatly resembles developments in caste society. There were frequent disputes about rank in the caste hierarchy, but the British considered the existing ranking as being ordained from time immemorial and were not easily inclined to allow any change.

Caste relations however were far from rigid. Economic or political improvement could lead to attempts at upward mobility by emulating the customs or beliefs of higher or locally dominant castes. This caste mobility has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. Similar movements within the system of Indian states, on the other hand, have remained a largely neglected area of historical research.

In this contribution the mobility of the Indian states will be analysed with the help of terms and concepts that have become usual for studying relations within the caste system. Among states, as among castes, there was a strong sense of hierarchy and a continual desire to rise in that hierarchy by emulating the privileges and ceremonial of larger or more highly placed states. The focus will be on the period between the two world wars, which saw the Indian princes becoming increasingly involved in what has been called the endgame of empire.

## Introduction

The colonisation from Western Europe was an early example of the nowadays eagerly discussed globalisation movement. England as a dominant world power played a prominent part in that movement with India as the brightest jewel in the crown. From the India Office in London, lines of administrative control ran through the Governor-General in New Delhi to all corners of the South Asian peninsula, including a large number of semi-independent princely states. In his

1 Funds for travel to and research in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library in London were kindly granted by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), The Hague.

incarnation as Viceroy, the Governor-General maintained relations with all these states, making use of the services of the Foreign and Political Department (later, the Political Department).

In pre-British times the Indian states were continuously involved in war and mutual conflict. With the establishment of the *pax Britannica* this political dynamic was curbed and the British never stopped boasting of it as their great achievement. In 1843 Lord Ellenborough wrote with hardly concealed satisfaction that “[t]he withdrawal of our restraining hand would let loose all the elements of confusion” (quoted in SEVER, 1985:I, 191). A return of that confusion had to be prevented at all costs, as the colonial government needed law and order. Thus, after the suppression of the Mutiny (1858), Charles Aitchison, secretary to the Political Department, carefully compiled all the extant treaties, engagements and *sanads* (rights of property) relating to the Indian states. Mortimer Durand, working as a junior officer under Aitchison, made an inventory of “Leading Cases”, which enabled Lewis Tupper to produce his voluminous standard work *Indian Political Practice*, “giving chapter and verse for the handling of every sort of question and quandary as regards the states”.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the British started to classify their political relations with the states into one hierarchical framework in an attempt, to use Cannadine’s phrase, to homogenise the heterogeneity of their empire (CANNADINE, 2002:85).

After the Mutiny, power over the Indian territories was transferred to the British Crown. Henceforth, the Viceroy was the locus of authority and everyone who counted in India could be ranked hierarchically in relation to the Viceroy. The same applied to the rulers of the Indian states, though not as a group but individually. As Cohn has observed, the British used an ordinal theory of hierarchy by which princely ranking was determined on the strength of objective criteria, political history and ceremonial distinctions (COHN, 1983:180). Such objective criteria as population figure and amount of revenue did not lend themselves very easily to dispute. The history of political relations, however, was the subject of heated debate and frequent reinterpretation. And a wide range of eagerly sought ceremonial distinctions – such as gun salutes, titles, and orders of chivalry – served to mark differences and make them visible to all those who cared to behold.

2 The quotation is from MACMUNN, 1936:168. At that time, the British possessed only scant and no systematic information on their relations with the Indian states, see RAMUSACK, 2004:93–94.

The suppression of an originally dynamic political system greatly resembles a similar development in caste hierarchy. The position of individual castes (*jatis*) in the hierarchy was fiercely contested, there were frequent disputes about claimed and accorded rank, and there was constant movement as a result of attempts at upward mobility. The British regarded the Sanskrit treatises on caste as normative texts and thought to do justice to Indian society by keeping close to the textual ideal. The large ethnographic handbooks and census reports, which started appearing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all considered the existing caste ranking as being ordained from time immemorial, and the British were not easily inclined to introduce any change in the divisions they had found upon their arrival.

M.N. Srinivas, however, has shown that the caste system was far from rigid. Apart from the ritual status determinant, which determined a caste's hierarchical ranking on the basis of relative purity, economic and political status determinants also played a prominent role. An improvement of economic or political position could lead to claims to a higher ritual position. Such vertical mobility was sought by emulating, as far as possible, the customs and beliefs of the Brahmins or a locally dominant caste, and by abandoning all practices considered polluting (SRINIVAS, 1962:42 and 1976:166ff.). As these higher castes were thought to live more in accordance with the normative Sanskrit tradition, Srinivas called this upward mobility 'Sanskritisation'.

This mobility in the caste hierarchy has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. There is no need to recapitulate the results of these studies here. The hierarchy and mobility within the system of Indian states, on the other hand, are usually mentioned only in passing and have remained a largely neglected area of historical research. It is not my intention in the following pages to present a detailed, comparative description of states and castes in India. Rather, I will try to analyse the mobility of Indian states with the help of terms and concepts that have become usual for studying relations within the caste hierarchy. In this endeavour, the focus will be on the period between the two world wars, which saw the Indian princes becoming increasingly involved in what Copland has called the "endgame of empire" (COPLAND, 1997).

Of course, most striking at first sight are the great differences. For instance, there was no economic specialisation among the states with the consequent mutual interdependence, which made the necessary separation between castes so complicated. And to add just one thing more: mobility within the caste system was a collective affair, whereas the rivalry between states had much to do with the status of the individual ruler. However, ruler and state were convertible



terms, as a maharaja would wholeheartedly agree with Louis XIV's famous dictum: "l'état c'est moi" (see also RAMUSACK, 2004:168). Both terms will thus be used interchangeably here, although – as will be seen – some ranking mechanisms (gun salutes) applied more to the ruler and others (population figures) more to the states.

There are also important similarities, first of all when we look at caste as a vital component of the status of the individual rulers. There are many references to princes snubbing other princes because of their lower caste ranking, whereas conversely some Jat-Sikh rulers, like Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, went to extraordinary lengths to get themselves reclassified as *pukka* Rajputs. Likewise the Maratha maharaja of Gwalior, one of the largest states, was said to have tried to ensure, when out riding, that his horse always stayed behind that of the Rajput maharaja of Alwar, a medium-sized state.

At a less personal level, castes and states might question their particular position in the hierarchy and the principles underlying their ranking, but the existence of a hierarchy as such was never the subject of discussion. Lower states tried to rise within the princely order by arrogating the rights, privileges and ceremonial distinctions pertaining to more dominant states. Also, as in the case of castes, an appeal to an invented tradition could be made in order to justify a claim to higher status. The most stubborn resistance against such claims was offered not by rulers at the top of the hierarchy but by rulers of more or less equal standing.

States, like castes, thus sought to rise in the hierarchy. But in the case of states, the ritual of caste was replaced by the ceremonial of the state. Srinivas remained rather vague about whether ritual in the process of Sanskritisation was a derivative or an autonomous factor. Among states, ceremonial seems to have been an independent domain of power, at least to some extent. Michael FISHER (1985:258), for instance, argues that the ruler of Awadh relied on the coronation ceremonial (1819) to enhance his position vis-à-vis the Mughal Emperor rather than to legitimise political gains already achieved. We will see whether in more recent times state ceremonial played a similar role.

The establishment of British rule resulted in the closure of many traditional avenues to the mobility of castes. But Western education, economic innovation and an incipient parliamentary democracy also offered previously unknown opportunities for social improvement and thus a higher position in the caste

hierarchy (SRINIVAS, 1968:191).<sup>3</sup> The question may be raised whether these observations about castes also apply to Indian states and their rulers. For a long time, the states were kept strictly separated to prevent, in Lord Ellenborough's words, a return of the confusion or, even worse, the development of a common front against the paramount power. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the colonial administration enlarged the scope for inter-state contact by bringing the ruling princes and chiefs together for joint consultations. Thus arose the delicate problem of their precedence at public functions. This rivalry was further accentuated by schemes for a political federation of British-Indian provinces and Indian states, which made the rulers feel uncertain about their mutual position in the prospective political constellation.

Finally, the mobility of castes as well as that of states was controlled by British administrators and was often used as an instrument to *divide et impera*. In former times, Hindu maharajas and rajas had the power to settle caste disputes and to raise or lower the ranks of castes as a reward or punishment. Muslim kings and even the British in the early days of their rule exercised at least the first function. In the case of states, the Mughal Emperor held the formal power to honour rulers by extending revenue rights, titles or grand receptions. With the collapse of the Mughal Empire, this practice came to an end and the Viceroy and his Political Department assumed the task of distributing honour among the princes and determining their ranking order. The construction and official safeguarding of that order will be discussed in the following sections.

## The Ranking of the States

After World War I the future constitution of British India became an increasingly important item on the political agenda. The *Indian States Committee* (1929) had declared that control of the princely states rested with the British Crown and should not be transferred without their own agreement to a relationship with a new government in British India responsible to an Indian legislature (INDIAN STATES COMMITTEE, 1929:13, 32). This statement had greatly pleased the Indian rulers. Nevertheless, the Committee had created a

3 In a posthumously published paper, Srinivas has argued that in the long run this combination of changes in technologies, institutions and ideas had the effect of greatly weakening the caste-based, hierarchical system of production at the local level, see SRINIVAS, 2003.

great deal of uncertainty, especially about the role of the princely states in the coming political federation. What was the ranking of the Indian states at that moment?

A first, but not much used ranking order could be made on the basis of such objective data as area, population and revenue. In such an order, the same states occupied the first ranks, though in alternating order. In the matter of area, Kashmir, Hyderabad, Jodhpur, Gwalior and Bikaner were the largest states, each covering over 20,000 square miles. The size of Kashmir and Hyderabad was similar to that of France and England. As regards population, Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore, Kashmir, Gwalior, Jaipur, Baroda and Jodhpur topped the list with more than two million people each. In 1931 Hyderabad had a population of more than 14 million. Because of the close correlation between population and revenue, the same states were at the top of the revenue table, most of them receiving more than Rs 2 crores (20 million rupees).

More important, but capable of divergent interpretation, was a ranking based on the quality of the political relations with the British paramount power. At least 43 of the more than 500 states had a treaty relationship. In this category were the original Rajput and Hindu states (e.g. Bikaner and Udaipur, and Travancore and Bharatpur, respectively), as well as states that had broken away from the crumbling Mughal Empire (e.g. Hyderabad and Bhopal). The earliest treaty was said to have been concluded in 1730 with Savantvadi (COPLAND, 1982:42), but several states vied with each other in their claims to be the first treaty partner of the British. The paramount power's relations with the other states were governed by *sanads* and other unilateral agreements.<sup>4</sup>

Even more important than having a treaty was what used to be called the quality of the sovereignty of the ruler. The more prominent princes claimed that their treaties showed an equality of status and recognised them as being in the enjoyment of sovereign independence. The British dismissed all such claims as inconsistent with historical facts. In their view, it may have been true of the earlier treaties, when the EIC was just a tax farming institution under the Mughal emperors. But it was clearly untrue of the later treaties in which the EIC on behalf of the British government assumed the function of a protector and to a greater or less extent restricted the internal powers of the states. And the original Rajput and Hindu states, which represented the old Hindu conception of sover-

4 ORIGIN, RISE AND CONSOLIDATION, 1929:124ff. The Indian states mentioned a number of 40 treaty states, including Dewas and Rampur, but excluding Dungarpur, Sunth, Kuch Behar, Cambay and Janjira, see CHAMBER OF PRINCES, 1929:216ff.

eignty, were rescued by the EIC from oppression by the Marathas. The relations created by their treaties amounted to a protectorate and in almost all cases they had to render tribute to the paramount power (ORIGIN, RISE AND CONSOLIDATION, 1929:126–127).

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fresh attempts were made to standardise the relations with the states in one hierarchical framework. An important instrument of classification was the number of gun salutes that a ruler was allowed to fire during state visits and other official functions. A first list of ‘salute states’ appeared in 1864. Having a salute was considered a mark of great distinction and gave the rulers much prestige.<sup>5</sup> If we pursue our comparison with the caste system, we might say that a gun salute drew a line equally as sharp as that drawn by the *upanayana* ritual, which separated the three highest *varnas* (twiceborn) from the many lower castes. MACMUNN (1936:222), who had served as a general in the British-Indian army, called “[t]he whole question of salutes [...] almost a science in itself”, adding that “intrigues to obtain an increase are by no means unknown”.<sup>6</sup>

In 1929 the number of states entitled to a gun salute had increased to 119, whereas more than 440 states had no salute at all. The number of salutes varied from 21 to nine. In 1930 only five states enjoyed the highest distinction of having 21 salutes, namely Hyderabad, Mysore, Baroda, Gwalior and Kashmir. An increase or reduction in the number of salutes was always possible, but only after Her Majesty’s pleasure in regard to it had been duly taken (TUPPER, 1895, III:235). In comparison, the number of gun salutes for the Viceroy was 31 and for the King-Emperor 101.

The five states with a 21-gun salute stood in direct relationship with the Political Department of the government of India through their own resident. The remaining states were regionally grouped into ten agencies – one of which was the Central Indian Agency, which had 28 salute and 69 non-salute states – controlled by an agent to the Governor-General (AGG). In a large agency, like that of Central India or Rajputana, the AGG was assisted by residents (as in Jaipur and Udaipur) and political agents (in smaller states). With a view to the impending federation, increasingly more states were transferred from provincial to central control. Nevertheless, in 1929 there were still many states whose rela-

5 We are referring here to permanent or dynastic salutes, but apart from that there were also personal and local salutes, TUPPER, 1895, III:233ff.

6 The same applied no less to the British ruling elite who, in the words of Lord Elgin, used to “fight for stars and ribbons like little boys for toys, and scream at us if we stop them”, quoted in CANNADINE, 2002:88.



tions with the government of India were carried on through provincial governments. Among them were 33 states entitled to a salute.

Other types of ranking mechanisms, like the Warrant of Precedence and the feats of history, will be discussed later. Yet, it will be clear that the grouping of states was rather confusing. Salute states differed greatly in size, revenue and political importance. They were further subdivided into rulers entitled to a return visit by the Viceroy and those who were not. Some salute states were under a provincial government, although direct relations with the centre were considered more prestigious. The question of precedence as between princes and chiefs did not always depend upon the number of guns to which they were entitled, some nine-gun states ranking above 11-gun states.<sup>7</sup> Also, there were states that could boast of a long-standing political relationship with the British without enjoying even the minimum of nine guns. Perhaps the most interesting fact is that the largest states with the maximum number of salutes did not possess full sovereign rights prior to their connection with the EIC.

After World War I the government of India decided to grant the princes an opportunity for joint consultation by instituting a Chamber of Princes. The institution of the Chamber signified the end of the isolation to which the states till then had been condemned by the Political Department. It also created the urgent problem of mutual ranking. The first question, of course, was which states were going to be admitted as members of the Chamber. The answer was based to a large extent on the existing ranking order, although new considerations were included.

In 1919, a committee of maharajas and nawabs recommended that the Chamber should be composed of "the Ruling Princes of India exercising full sovereign powers, i.e. unrestricted civil and criminal jurisdiction over their subjects and the power to make their own laws", and "[a]ll other Princes enjoying hereditary salutes of 11 guns and over". The committee added the provision that no state having feudatory, that is, tributary relations with any other Indian state should be eligible for membership of the Chamber. Such states were regarded as the untouchables of princely India, and the more prominent rulers refused to sit with them on the same consultative body. After sounding his secretary of state, the Viceroy – Lord Chelmsford – was pleased to observe that he fully agreed with the Committee's recommendations.

7 At least that was the situation when Tupper compiled his famous standard work, see TUPPER, 1895, III:235–236.

In a previous draft of their recommendations the princes had suggested that membership of the Chamber should be based merely upon constitutional considerations and not upon any invidious distinction like the salute list, and Lord Chelmsford was of the opinion that these thoughts were on the right lines. In 1919, however, the main parties involved appeared to have changed their mind. In a final draft of the scheme, the committee of ruling princes recommended that apart from full internal powers a hereditary salute of 11 guns or more should also qualify rulers for membership. And although Lord Chelmsford reiterated his stance that for making distinctions between states constitutional considerations were preferable, he now stated that “[O]wing to the extreme difficulty of defining with precision the phrase ‘full powers of internal administration’ [...], I am convinced that it would really be wisest, after all, to base the distinction primarily upon the salute list.” Chelmsford admitted that the salute list as it stood was unsatisfactory, as the number of salutes in many cases no longer corresponded to the actual importance of a state. Therefore, he felt that the whole question of salutes needed most careful investigation at an early date. “My Government are ready to give their earnest consideration to this matter and will make the necessary recommendations to the Secretary of State for submission to His Imperial Majesty in due course”.<sup>8</sup>

The matter was submitted to the Political Department for a final decision. The Department ruled that 108 states with full or practically full internal powers or a minimum of 11 salutes were to become permanent members of the Chamber of Princes. In addition, 12 minor princes were to be elected to represent a large group of smaller states, which were not included in the first two categories but nevertheless possessed a reasonable measure of internal sovereignty (*Gazette of India, Extraordinary*, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1921).

In 1921 the Chamber of Princes was formally inaugurated at the Red Fort in Delhi by the Duke of Connaught. It was to meet annually and became the most important body of consultation for the government. However, the powers of the Chamber remained limited and attendance was generally poor. Some of the most important princes refused to attend the meetings and many smaller states were excluded. Thus, the Chamber came to be dominated by a group of middle-sized, mainly Rajput rulers whose states were situated within relatively easy travelling distance from Delhi (COPLAND, 1997:46ff.). The 12 representa-

8 Quotations taken from correspondence in L/P&S/13/1761, Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC) of the British Library. All the archival sources referred to in this article are preserved in the OIOC.



tive princes, who as temporary members hovered around the threshold of the meeting hall, turned out to be the most active element in the Chamber's proceedings and seldom missed a meeting.

### The Committee on Ceremonials (CoC)

On 9 January 1929, the Standing Committee of the Chamber of Princes discussed the question of the standardisation of ceremonials. As this was considered a complicated question, a special committee was instituted to collect material, investigate existing problems and offer suggestions for their resolution. This Committee on Ceremonials (CoC) consisted of Bhupinder Singh, maharaja of Patiala (1900–1938), Chancellor of the Chamber; Ganga Singh Rator, maharaja of Bikaner (1887–1943), who was highly esteemed by the government and whose camel corps had fought in World War I; Hari Singh Dogra, maharaja of Kashmir (1925–1949); and Charles Watson, Secretary to the Political Department (1927–1933).<sup>9</sup>

The CoC has not received a great deal of attention, and for obvious reasons. It was overshadowed by the Imperial Conference (October 1930) and especially by the Round Table Conferences (1930–32) in London, at which constitutional reforms and the creation of a political federation of British India and the princely states were discussed. Major states, which generally had remained aloof from the Chamber of Princes, started mutual consultations via their prime ministers, and an Indian States Delegation attended the Round Table Conferences on behalf of a large majority of states. The great importance of these Conferences in the light of later developments is the main reason why the CoC has remained largely unnoticed in the extant literature.

Most of the smaller states were greatly concerned about their political position in the prospective federation and insisted on a strong representation in the federal parliament. Early in 1931, the Indian States Delegation forwarded a proposal for a nominated upper house of 250 seats, half of which would be reserved for the states, and a partly elected, partly nominated lower house of 350 seats, apportioned as between Indian states and British provinces in the ratio 40:60. The problem of seat distribution gave the mutual rivalry for position a fresh impetus, and some states refused to consider the idea of federation without

9 Extract from Proceedings of the Standing Committee, 9-1-1929, in R/2/508/160.

a guarantee of their representation in parliament. Differences concerning federation and seat distribution even threatened to split the Chamber of Princes, but in March 1932 internal harmony was restored, at least temporarily (COPLAND, 1997:92, 107; PHADNIS, 1968:59). At about the same time, discussions took place in the CoC.

The CoC was important, at least for our discussion of the ceremonial distinctions claimed by the states as part of their attempts at upward political mobility. In July 1931 the Viceroy had received a "Note on Honours, Ceremonials and Dignities" from the nawab of Bhopal, the newly appointed Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes. Thereupon it was agreed that the CoC would start by discussing the note and that the nawab would join the Committee. Between January and April 1932, the CoC met four times in New Delhi, where Bhopal's note with comments from the Political Department was subjected to a detailed discussion. The maharaja of Alwar was co-opted as a member. At the second and the fourth meeting the chair was occupied by the Viceroy himself, who was assisted by his private and military secretaries. In July 1932 the Political Department sent the record of these proceedings to all princely governments inviting their comments. In the forwarding letter the Department emphasised that the work of the CoC was not yet completed and that decisions still had to be reached on many points.

In what follows, I will examine in more detail some of the points raised in Bhopal's note, the proceedings of the CoC and the comments from different rulers.<sup>10</sup> This should enable us to better understand the broad repertoire of political traditions and ceremonial claims that states used in their dealings with the Political Department to gain a more favourable position in the political hierarchy.

### *Ranking*

The delicate question of ranking was not openly touched upon during the sessions of the CoC. The ruling princes and chiefs preferred to raise this subject at an informal meeting with the Viceroy. After the last session of the CoC in April 1932, it was agreed that the Political Department should put forward definite proposals for a scheme of grouping of states for ceremonial purposes, which might serve as a basis for further discussion. Therefore, many states

10 Committee on Ceremonials 1932 with note by Bhopal and comments by the Political Department, including a Record of the Proceedings in R/2/508/150. Comments on the Record of Proceedings as received from ruling princes and chiefs, 1932–1944, in L/P&S/13/1761.

observed in their written reply that they would not be in a position to give their full comments until the question of ranking had been satisfactorily settled. Though not on the agenda, this question with all its complexities loomed large in the background of all discussions.

As might be expected, the dominant states had no problem with the existing ranking order. Hyderabad, in spite of its prominent position, contented itself with a very brief comment on Bhopal's note and the Committee's proceedings. A more comprehensive reply was not considered proper in view of the critical distance it had always kept vis-à-vis the Chamber of Princes and all that it meant. However, the Nizam – the ruler of Hyderabad – informed the resident by letter that he considered it unjust “that all the Princes of different treaties and status and positions should be treated alike by the Supreme Government”. The large state of Mysore also thought it highly desirable “to maintain some distinction between the various grades of Princes”.

States that enjoyed no salute or felt underprivileged in that respect protested against the existing table of salutes. The ruler of Aundh – a small state in Bombay without any salute – disapproved of all distinctions made on the basis of gun salutes, membership of the Chamber and personal or dynastic titles, as “unwarranted and opposed to reason and justice.” The *Raja Sahib* of Bansda and the maharaja of Rajpipla (Bombay) went so far as to call a ranking on the basis of gun salutes “an invidious and arbitrary distinction”. Udaipur, which enjoyed 19-gun salutes, scorned the idea of being ranked at the same level as princes entitled to only 17-gun salutes. Dungarpur in Rajputana (15 salutes) on the other hand considered itself in no way inferior to any of the 17-gun princes. “Indeed, there are few States in India who can boast of a more ancient origin, nobler history and proud traditions, and dynastic status”, so it wrote in its comments. The nawab of Loharu, a state in the Punjab with nine-gun salutes, referred to the extant sanads to argue that it had much in common with 11-gun states. But it was definitely opposed to grouping nine-gun states in the same category as states without a salute.

What this discussion makes abundantly clear is that all states wanted to keep their distance from the states immediately below them in the hierarchy. The dividing line at 17 guns, however, was of particular importance as it was also observed by the British, for instance on the occasion of receptions or when arranging guards of honour. In his note, Bhopal had argued that during receptions at the Viceroy's House, ruling princes should not be taken from place to place for conversation but those desirous of talking to the rulers should be presented to them. The Political Department had replied that this was current

practice for ruling princes having a salute of 17 guns or more. During his meeting with the CoC in February 1932, the Viceroy confirmed that princes of that rank might indicate to the aide-de-camp the names of those individuals with whom they would like to speak, and that the aide-de-camp would arrange for them to be brought before the prince concerned.<sup>11</sup> Also for guards of honour, the British used 17 guns as a dividing line, but the rules on this matter were laid down in the Regulations for the Army of India, which fell beyond the purview of the Political Department. Nevertheless, the princely members of the CoC registered the complaint that whereas a guard of honour for British officials was usually commanded by a captain, when it came to the ruler of a state the commander was an Indian *subedar*, which was considered less respectful. Indore was always honoured by a British guard during state visits, and urgently requested that this practice remain unchanged.

In the meantime, in March 1932 a Committee of the Chamber of Princes had submitted a table showing the first 69 Chamber states according to a composite standard of salutes, area, revenue, population and treaty rights. Although this table was not discussed by the CoC, several Indian rulers reacted to it in their written comments, in most cases negatively. The Begum Sahiba, Regent of Janjira, rejected the table, because neighbouring states in Bombay (e.g. Baria, Chota Udepar and Savantvadi) with nine-gun salutes were included, whereas Janjira was not, even though it was entitled to 11-gun salutes. Janjira acknowledged that it was small in terms of area, revenue and population, but mentioned as a criterion of no less importance its role in history – not further specified – and its political relationship with the British government. It claimed to have had a treaty of alliance with Bombay since 1773, whereas the table listed a great many states which “cannot at all hope to put forward such political relationship as this state can”. It seems, though, that Janjira and similar states did not have a formal treaty with Bombay but were indirect allies only as subjects either to Baroda or to the Maratha Confederacy.

Bhor, another small state in the Bombay Presidency, followed a different line of argument. It insisted that only such quantitative criteria as revenue and population were to be used in a grouping of states and broached the subject of membership of the Chamber of Princes. As the Chief of Bhor had received a dynastic salute and extension of his powers only in 1927, he was not a full

11 In her novel Gita Mehta describes a reception in London on the occasion of Queen Victoria's jubilee (1897), where the Indian princes “stood with the customary immobility of Eastern rulers among the circulating guests”, (MEHTA, 1999:24).



member of the Chamber. Bhor now produced a list of 18 states, which, although smaller in area, revenue and population, were permanent members of the Chamber, merely because they happened to have commanded the minimum number of nine-gun salutes in 1919. Bhor had become a representative member, but resented what it felt to be an unjustified subordination to lesser states, and pointed out that in the pre-British Maratha state, Bhor had held a higher ministry than the military commanders of Sangli and Mudhol, which now as states were permanent members.<sup>12</sup>

Sangli sent the Political Department a well-considered reply. Its ruler pointed out that the grant of gun salutes was not based on uniform principles and reflected the political situation of more than 70 years ago. Therefore, gun salutes were “a relic of a by-gone age” and “altogether an unreliable criterion” for the standardisation of ceremonial. The Kathi state of Jasdan had taken the trouble to delve into recent history and had found that gun salutes were introduced in Kathiawar in 1871 in correspondence with Keatinge’s regional classification of states. Under that classification, Jasdan had to suffer the great injustice of being placed in class III together with the junior branches of Rajput premier states, whereas the Rajput states were included in classes I and II.

The Dewan of Savantvadi, acting on behalf of his princely master, wrote in similar vein. Quoting Lord Chelmsford’s admission in 1919 that the salute table contained many anomalies, he referred to England, where during official visits sovereigns or heads of independent states received the same courtesies, irrespective of the size, population, etc. of their state. The Dewan of Sandur (Madras), on behalf of his raja, rejected any ranking of states on the basis of gun salutes, “which [...] cannot but accentuate the wounded susceptibilities of a majority of the Princely Order who are at present smarting with indignation due to the anomalies they are still labouring under as a result of the classification of States in 1919.” In his opinion, full administrative powers should be the only condition for membership of the Chamber; in this he was supported by a large number of states, which thought to qualify by that criterion. The liberal ruler of Aundh, who had adopted a constitution and was to be the first to introduce responsible government in 1939, urged that states with a constitutional and progressive ad-

12 To serve his cause, Bhor published glossy brochures with the full text of all his speeches in the Chamber, see L /P&S/13/289. But he seems to have been under the mistaken impression that states like Sangli and Mudhol qualified for permanent membership of the Chamber merely because they were entitled to gun salutes.

ministration should be given precedence over states which did not have the benefit of such administration.

### *Precedence*

Another delicate question was the placing of the princes in the Warrant of Precedence. In British India, the Warrant – which was reminiscent of the Mughal hierarchy of nobles – settled the ranking of British high officials on their arrival, reception and departure on formal occasions. The increasing standardisation of ceremonial implied that also princes had to be included in the Warrant, although their specific positioning remained a topic of discussion.<sup>13</sup>

In his note, Bhopal had argued that ruling princes should be given precedence over provincial governors even in their own provinces. His reasoning was that only the Viceroy represented the King-Emperor in India and that the position of a governor was merely that of a high official. The Political Department refused to accept this argument: a governor was appointed by and represented the King and, therefore, it was an accepted principle that a governor in his own province should give precedence to no one save the Viceroy. The Department was, however, ready to accept the general practice of giving the more important ruling princes precedence over governors of provinces when the latter were outside their own jurisdiction. Also, residents and AGGs, when outside their own jurisdiction, should always give precedence to any ruler who enjoyed a salute. And even within their jurisdiction, residents and AGGs were not entitled to such precedence, save possibly over a ruler entitled to only nine guns.

Another suggestion from Bhopal was that members of councils should not take precedence over ruling princes. In its reply, the Political Department concentrated on the members of the Viceroy's Executive Council, which was the highest administrative body. The Department pointed out that the more important ruling princes were always given precedence over members of the Viceroy's Council in their individual capacity, but not when the latter met as representing the government of India. At public and official functions, the members of the Council must have a prominent place as the corporate body responsible for that function. As under the constitution then in force the princes had no share in the government of India, they were present only in their capacity as honoured guests. The Commander-in-Chief was always given special precedence in India over ruling princes.

13 That discussion was finally closed by the "Revised Warrant of Precedence for India", laid down in 1937, in R/3/1/227. See also MCLEOD, 1999:247.



The discussion on precedence was primarily an exchange between Bhopal and the Political Department. The other states in their comments seem to have been preoccupied mainly with the question of their particular placing in the Warrant of Precedence. Udaipur anticipated a great problem. The ruler of this state – who claimed to descend from Ram, the legendary god-king of Ayodhya – firmly refused to give precedence to any other ruler in processions to the Viceroy.

### *Precedents*

A general principle dealt with by Bhopal in his note concerned precedents to which states made frequent appeal. The note suggested that the best precedents for any state should “be applied to that particular state and may also be made applicable to all states in that group or any higher group, if they so desire.” In other words, states should be free to adopt any privilege and ceremonial from states of equal or lower rank, but refrain from emulating states that were higher. At the CoC meeting in March 1932 the Viceroy was pleased to accept this principle.

However, the wording of the principle created the opportunity to claim distinctions that may have been enjoyed in the past but fallen into disuse. Sangli made clever use of this opportunity. Its ruler stated that states of a lower group, if they so desire, “should be enabled to avail themselves of the ‘best precedents’ for the State in a higher group, when the States have enjoyed Honours, Dignities and Ceremonials *ejusdem generis* [...]”. And he had some very special precedents in mind. Referring to mainly English historical sources, he asserted that under an agreement made with the British in 1820, the ruler of Sangli – who was now entitled to only nine-gun salutes – was guaranteed continuance of the honour of a salute of 17 and 13 guns. A member of his family was said to have met the Governor-General in 1791 at a tent pitched midway between the Maratha and the British camp, on which occasion a salute of 21 guns was fired. The ruler of Sangli also claimed that when paying visits he used to be received by representatives of the British government who came out to meet him, a privilege granted in a letter from Elphinstone (1819).

Unfortunately, Sangli suffered from some temporary weaknesses during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the table of salutes and other ceremonials were settled. Appealing to these historic incidents the ruler of Sangli now begged for the restoration of the 13 or 17 salutes said to be due to him and of the 21 salutes due to his family members. Also, he asked for the right to meet the Viceroy midway between their camps and for British officials to come out to

meet him. These claims were thus not presented as an innovation but as a return to the "best precedents", which in a time of need had been lost. We see the same when groups mobilise to raise their position in the caste hierarchy. Several lower castes have claimed at one time or another the status of *kshatriya* which they alleged to have been deprived of in the past by some fatal misunderstanding. A famous case is that of the toddy tappers in Tamilnadu, who have been studied and described by HARDGRAVE, 1969.

### *Visits*

The ceremonial of visits was of major importance, especially because it took place largely in public. The reception and salutation of guests as well as the allocation of seats at dinners and durbars allowed for a great deal of variation. Such could be used to mark difference in rank and was well understood by all those concerned. I will limit the discussion of the documents to just a few aspects.

The arrival or departure of a Viceroy at Bombay – the Gateway to India – was always a great event. Bhopal had suggested that rulers present on that occasion might sit on a separate dais to the right of the Viceroy in the same line and at the same elevation, and should have precedence over all officials. On their arrival at the Gateway, the rulers should be taken to their seats by the Political Secretary and they should first greet the Viceroy at the lower landing of the steps. In a rather weak defence against these claims, the Political Department had pointed at the limited space at the Gateway and the need to have other officials assist the Political Secretary in his manifold duties. It also reminded Bhopal that the government of India, as the highest authority present, might be said to represent the host, whereas the princes were simply the most honoured guests on that occasion. In their reactions to the proceedings, most states refrained from commenting on this matter.

The exchange of visits in the capitals of individual states drew more attention. Bhopal had proposed to give up all ceremonial in connection with visits by residents and AGGs to a princely court. Newly appointed political officers should merely present their credentials in the form of a *kharita* (official letter) from the Viceroy without a formal return visit by the ruler. More in general, on public occasions British political officers should not expect any courtesies, which in the eye of the local public might make them the equals of the rulers.

In reply to Bhopal, it was now the Political Department that appealed to precedent: "The practice of exchange of ceremonial visits has behind it the sanction of long established custom. It is also a special feature of the East." A similar

statement had been made by the maharaja of Bikaner, who in 1909 had urgently requested to strictly maintain all existing ceremonials, as, “[s]plendour and ceremonials being special features of the East, the importance of a person is gauged by the populace according to the compliments paid to them.”<sup>14</sup> The Department referred to that letter and declared that it highly valued the occasional ceremonial exchange of visits, as it was the only outward and visible sign to testify to the cordial relationship between a ruler and the government of India. In view of the many differences among states, the Department preferred to avoid laying down precise rules, except in regard to ceremonial connected with viceregal visits to Indian states.

The maharana of Wankaner (western India) let it be known that as far as he was concerned the ceremonial exchange of visits between rulers and political officers might be dispensed with altogether to the advantage of all concerned. But many of the other states said that they appreciated a continuation of these exchange visits, and it is clear that Bhopal was not voicing the opinion of the majority of smaller states. The Thakur of Bhadarwa, who had fewer than 10,000 subjects, expressed the desire that return visits be granted more freely to the princes. And he repeated the argument used so often in discussions between the princes and the Political Department that ceremonial visits were a special feature of the East.

Kolhapur, a state in Bombay with 19-gun salutes, was in favour of continuing the exchange of visits, but made the point that a political officer should make the first call on the ruling prince and that the prince should pay a return visit. Bhor referred to former times when the Governor of Bombay used to visit the ruling princes and minor chiefs who were spending the cold season in Poona, and expressed disappointment about the discontinuation of this practice. It also regretted that princes and chiefs when visiting the Governor were no longer garlanded on behalf of the government.

### *Phraseology and Forms of Address*

Bhopal had referred to the tradition that official correspondence used to be in Persian, which ensured that “the ceremonial phraseology was fully in keeping with the dignity of the Rulers”. As the *kharitas* were now written in English, words and phrases were being substituted which in his view were not in keeping with the position and status of ruling princes. The Political Department denied that these changes were intentional and explained that in drafting correspon-

14 Letter from the Maharaja of Bikaner to the Viceroy, 29-12-1909, in R/2/508/166.

dence the English language, as compared with Persian, might lack some of the phraseology necessary to express the ceremonial courtesies of the East. In the CoC however, the Department promised to do its utmost to maintain the ancient and recognised phraseology of *kharitas*.

It may come as no surprise that the formal styles of address for letters from the Viceroy were also hierarchised. The CoC was of opinion that these styles might be standardised according to whatever system of grouping of states might be adopted. It suggested that the standard form in letters to the highest category of princes should be "My honoured and valued friend" and for the third and lowest category "My dear friend". The types of *kharita* bags and strings to be used with these letters should be standardised along similar lines. The Viceroy approved of these suggestions, which followed established precedent, including the proposal that the invariable style of address in all other cases should be "Your Highness". Sangli wrote in its comments that its ruler was always addressed in the vernacular as "My dear, kind and esteemed friend" and that the English language furnished appropriate phraseology to translate these terms. But nowadays, Sangli continued, we are addressed as "My friend". That was considered derogatory to the status of its ruler and could not be explained away by language alone.

Another point raised by Bhopal was that in correspondence no phraseology should be used which might imply that Indian rulers were not sovereigns in their own states or were feudatories of the Crown. From the discussions it becomes clear that the princely members of the CoC resented the use of such indigenous terms as "dewan", "gaddi" and "darbar", and wanted to replace them with "prime minister", "throne" and "government", which were considered to be more respectful. In this case, the claim to a higher status was made not by appealing to local traditions but by emulating Western models, as was also the case in the matter of gun salutes.<sup>15</sup> SRINIVAS (1962:42ff.) has called this 'Westernisation' a variant form of 'Sanskritisation'. Sometimes this tendency became evident in a slight change of wording, for instance when rulers wanted their military units to be called "armies" rather than "state forces", or referred to "Western Indian States" in preference to "Western Indian States Agency".

15 The India Office in London noted that princes even preferred European ceremonial, as they felt Indian ceremonial to be "servile and humiliating", see "Grievances of Indian Princes", a note by Sir R. Glancy (1931), L/P&S/13/789. In his note, Bhopal suggested discontinuing the custom of presenting gold coins (*nazrana*) during visits to the Viceroy, and instead to shake hands (the gold coins were immediately returned after being touched).



In a first reaction, the Political Department admitted that for a long time the government of India had discountenanced the use of such expressions as “royal, throne, court, prince etc.” in connection with the states. After World War I it had become more compliant by permitting their use, even though the government saw no reason to adopt those terms in official correspondence. However, such terms as “royal” and “independent prince” remained disallowed, as their use implied an infringement of the prerogative of the Crown. The Department further observed that members of the Chamber of Princes were referred to as “ruling princes” and that the designation “chief” was generally applied only to lesser rulers of small states. In other words: the government of India thought that it had met the princely demands to a very large extent.

That was acknowledged by the princes in the CoC. Nevertheless, there remained matters about which no agreement could be reached, for instance whether a succession to the throne should be called an “investiture with ruling powers” or an “assumption of ruling powers”. On this point a more fundamental discussion was required within the near future.

In their comments on the proceedings of the CoC, the smaller states voiced their protest against the distinction in forms of address between “prince” and “chief”. Surgaja (Central Provinces) thought that this could be avoided without prejudice to the rights and privileges of a ruling prince. Aundh and Bhore added that the term “chief” was derogatory to the dignity of those rulers who – like in their own case – were exercising full ruling powers. Apart from that, Bhore regarded the term chief for its own ruler as overtaken by events, as it had recently been granted a dynastic salute of nine guns. Henceforth, it wanted to be addressed as Raja, as was done in case of Sangli. Referring to Lord Chelmsford’s 1919 speech, it emphasised the lack of uniformity in existing designations. Whereas in northern India large landholders gloried in the title of raja or maharaja, the rulers of central Indian states such as Gwalior and Indore used to be known by the title of *sardar* and their possessions as *jagirs*.

Kolhapur, a state ruled by non-Brahmins, took an exceptional position, probably because it felt inferior to the neighbouring Brahmin-ruled states. Here, the heir apparent was called *Yuvaraj*. No question of recognition of this title had ever arisen and other states were invited to follow this example. Besides, very recently the term “prime minister” had replaced “dewan”, and the children of the ruler were officially addressed as “princes and princesses”. Wankaner (nine-gun salutes) rejected any differentiation between “governments” and “darbars”. In international relations all states were equal and a state such as Afghanistan was treated in the same way as France or the USA was. The ruler thus ignored the

unpleasant reality that Indian states had no foreign policy of their own and were internationally represented by the government of India.

### *Titles and Orders*

Bhopal's claim that rulers should be free to confer titles, form orders of chivalry and award war medals provoked a vehement discussion. The Political Department tried to dampen unwarranted expectations and reminded the princes that on this matter general principles had been drawn up in consultation with their chamber. These principles were not open to discussion, as it was a subject touching the prerogative of the King-Emperor. Much of the ceremonial concerning titles and orders was not Indian in origin but derived from the British, who resisted its too direct adoption. In an internal note, the India Office in London observed condescendingly that "Government can hardly tolerate a burlesque of [...] the insignia of the orders of chivalry in every ramshackle castle in central India [...]"<sup>16</sup>

The princes claimed that as rulers of Indian states they had an inherent right to confer Indian titles on their own subjects, and to have these titles recognised by the Crown. But they felt annoyed by the government of India conferring titles that were indigenous Indian titles. In this connection, the maharaja of Alwar referred to the titles of maharaja and nawab, which in his opinion ought to be confined to ruling princes but were conferred by the Viceroy on British-Indian subjects. Alwar feared that the value of these higher titles might decrease as their number increased. Therefore, he suggested that the right to confer them should be restricted to ruling princes in the first group, whatever the final system of grouping might be. As the princes in the CoC were unable to reach an agreement, it was decided that they should consider the question further before putting forward more definite proposals.

The princes also claimed their inherent right to create orders in their own state, and to confer orders, decorations or medals on their own subjects or officers, subject, of course, to the King's permission in the case of British subjects. Although a memorandum of principles had been drawn up, the princes contended that these principles did not always conform to the terms of their treaties. They looked enviously at the rulers of the Malay States and Zanzibar who had orders of their own and were fully free to confer these orders even on British subjects. It was agreed that Bhopal as the Chancellor of the Chamber was to

16 See note by R. Glancy, 1931, mentioned in previous note. On the orders of chivalry, see McLEOD, 1994.



state the claims and requests of the princes in full detail in a formal letter. As regards war medals, the Viceroy's suggestion was adopted: "Should any ruler of an Indian state desire to grant war medals to his troops, the proposal will be considered on its merits and His Majesty's pleasure will be taken."

The comments on these proceedings received from the states differed widely, but shared a common concern with the maintenance of their rights. Especially the smaller states proved very vocal, most probably because their rights were the most liable to suffer. Kolhapur claimed that its rulers cherished a long tradition of conferring honours on persons who merited them. Sandur called it part of its sovereignty, and Aundh was of the opinion that all titles conferred by states with full powers should be recognised by the government. Mysore put forward a pretension that suited its status as a state entitled to 21-gun salutes: it demanded freedom to invest British titles. The Resident forwarded Mysore's letter along with a personal note stating that this demand was of course impossible.

A well-considered reply was received from the states of Kapurthala and Sangli. Kapurthala, a Sikh state in the Punjab, referred to the Mughal practice of acknowledging meritorious service by conferring *khillats* (robes of honour) and *jagirs*. By donning *khillats*, the king incorporated into his body the persons of those who shared his rule (GORDON, 2001), while the grant of *jagirs* implied the right to the revenue of a particular area for a certain period. As the grant of power or revenue had become virtually impossible under the *pax Britannica*, Kapurthala argued that "the decorations granted by Princes should be regarded in the nature of a modern and cheap substitute for *khillats* and *jagirs* that used to be conferred in the past [...]". Sangli was so keen as to add that any restriction imposed upon a state as regards its ability to reward or encourage merit would render it less efficient in performing its essential duties of government.

## Concluding Remarks

At the conclusion of the Round Table Conferences in London, the British Government published a White Paper containing proposals for constitutional reform. In several respects these proposals were not unfavourable to the princely states. The White Paper allotted the states 100 seats in the prospective upper house (total of 260 seats) and 125 seats in the lower house (375 seats). That was less than they had asked for, but with this number of seats at their disposal, they held

the balance of power in their own hands. In addition, the princes and chiefs retained the right to have their representatives nominated rather than elected.

No specific proposals were put forward concerning the allocation of seats among the states' members of the future federation. Yet, the government of India held the view that the allocation of seats in the upper house should be based "on the relative rank and importance of the state as indicated by dynastic salute and other factors" (WHITE PAPER, 1933:6). In other words, the ceremonial gun salute was not subordinate but of crucial importance to the distribution of political influence. The government intended to allocate seats in the lower house mainly according to population figures. This would give Hyderabad the right to nominate 16 members to the lower house, and smaller states as Janjira, Mudhol and Bhore together only one. In 1935 these proposals with only some minor changes were included in the new India Act.

However, the aim of this article was not to look for the political results of princely effort in this period, but to establish how mutual relations between the Indian states compared with the hierarchy and mobility that we know from studies of the caste system. After this brief analysis of the files of the CoC, the similarities between states and castes stand out even more clearly. Among states, as among castes, there was a strong sense of hierarchy and an continual desire to rise in that hierarchy by emulating the privileges and ceremonial of larger and/or directly neighbouring states.

As many of these privileges and much of the ceremonial were of European origin, this upward social mobility could take the form of Westernisation. In the same way that caste organisations made use of the printing press to mobilise their ranks, states instituted orders of knighthood after the European model to strengthen their claims to higher status. Some parts of Indian ceremonial, such as titles and phraseology, remained, but others were restricted by the British. The presentation of *peshkash* (gifts) and *nazrana* (gold coins), their value carefully graded according to the rank of the donors, was subjected to strict rules, as the British were inclined to view these presentations as a form of bribery. After formal permission, only the more prominent rulers were allowed to offer presents, provided they were "objects of interest more than of value".<sup>17</sup>

In their quest for status some princes went so far as to claim the rights and ceremonial reserved for the rulers of the largest states, namely Hyderabad and Mysore. The British rejected these claims, just like those of lower castes for

17 See instructions of the government of Bombay to the Resident of Baroda on the occasion of the Duke of Edinburgh's 1870 visit, R/2/489/75.

*kshatriya* status, as absolutely unfounded. Nevertheless, the British seem to have felt more free to intervene in the rivalry between states than in that between castes. Castes, in their view, were a delicate matter, as they had to do with religion and a ranking order sanctioned by Sanskrit tradition. Experience had shown that a colonial administration would be wise to remain aloof from this sensitive area. In the princely states, however, political power and personal manipulation were the dominant issues, and they represented a world in which the British felt more at home. The extant files and documents show that the British used the differential award of privilege as an effective instrument of reward and punishment<sup>18</sup>, thus increasing mutual rivalry between the states and preventing any joint opposition.

In discussions on ceremonial, the rulers of the Indian states were free to raise their questions. Yet, that liberty could not disguise the uneasy fact that the British took the final decisions. They called the meetings with the princes, controlled the agenda, and saw to it that the prerogatives of the Crown and the independence of the army remained unimpaired. The officers of the Political Department determined and eagerly watched the princely ranking order much more than the Mughals had done in their heydays, thus hardening existing lines of demarcation.

There remains, however, an important difference: mobility in the caste system, as SRINIVAS (1962:45; 1976:183) has shown, was largely determined by economic and political criteria. Increased power in the economic and political sphere could lead to attempts to acquire more ritual power and thus a higher position in the caste hierarchy. Something similar happened in the sphere of political organisation. Leaders of a dominant caste or local chieftains could graduate to the position of raja or king by conquering land and capturing political power (SRINIVAS, 1968:190). However, the establishment of a colonial government effectively closed this avenue to mobility through war and conquest. Whereas under colonialism castes got several opportunities to improve and thus increase their hierarchical ranking, for states similar chances remained more limited. Nevertheless, a number of states had their salutes revised upward in recognition of administrative and economic reforms (Travancore, Bhavnagar) or services rendered in times of crisis (several states within the Punjab).

18 The paramount power could also be managed by adroit princes who knew exactly when to request for honours, for instance when the Empire faced a time of crisis, see MCLEOD, 1999:257.

After World War I, the maharaja of Bikaner had requested the Viceroy to see that the princes be given land grants in India or in conquered German territory abroad (e.g. German East Africa) as a reward for their war services, as had been done in appreciation of princely support during the Mutiny. The request was not complied with. The British had no more land to give, and titles and other distinctions became divorced from land and revenue. The princes were granted their own Chamber and were invited to join discussions concerning a political federation. Ceremonial offered a separate site for the construction of power, as can be seen from the conditions of membership of the Chamber and the allocation of seats in the upper house. However, the powers of the Chamber remained weak and the federal parliament never met. Federation was overtaken by Independence.

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