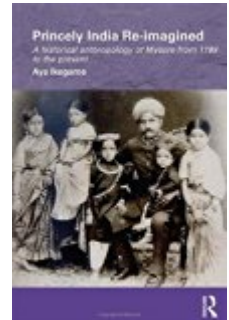


Aya Ikegame. *Princely India Re-imagined: A Historical Anthropology of Mysore from 1799 to the Present.* Routledge/Edinburgh South Asian Studies Series. Oxford: Routledge, 2012. 212 pp. \$145.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-55449-7.



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Kingship in modern South Asia has long remained an unjustly neglected research area in scholarship. While studies on precolonial India proliferate with arguments about the nature of kingship in the subcontinent, scholars working on the colonial and postcolonial periods of South Asian history remain (with a few important exceptions) largely taciturn when it comes to acknowledging the significance of regimes and discourses about kingship in shaping South Asian modernities. Kingship, however defined, seems to be relegated to the domain of the antique and the outmoded, with little lasting contribution to the pressing concerns of mass politics and contestations over social power in the present age.

As a result of this relative silence, it remains inadequately understood whether kingship is merely a vertical institution that can only obstruct the emergence of popular politics, or whether kingship can also play a dynamic role in facilitating the institutional and cultural bases for popular power and democratization. Moreover, the practical reality of kingship as a political institution (as evident in the princely states or the

British imperial monarchy in colonial India) remains to be distinguished from images of ideal kingship in popular imagination in the past as well as now. It may well be that even as practical realities are entangled with extortionate hierarchies, the images of moral kingship may ironically articulate popular aspirations for justice and empowerment precisely against those hierarchies. Are the practical and imaginative realities, moreover, so poignantly distinguishable, or are there interactions between them as well? These constitute crucial research gaps in existing scholarship on colonial and postcolonial India. As such, and perhaps most importantly, they constitute a critical vacuum in our understanding about, and engagement with, popular conceptions of power, social justice, and political expectation in South Asia. Comprehending these notions has more than theoretical relevance in sharpening everyday negotiation and solidarity with popular politics in the subcontinent.

Aya Ikegame's book is a pioneering study because it begins to address some of these questions. Her focus is on Mysore, one of colonial India's

most important princely states in terms of size, population, revenue contribution, as well as (from the late nineteenth century) the forging of cultural nationalism, mass politics, and carefully engineered economic dynamism. Ikegame is influenced by Burton Stein's conceptualization of the segmentary state in precolonial South India, i.e., the idea that before the advent of the British, the core state apparatus in South India was often weak, and had tenuous ritual control over the peripheries. The state-system was indeed multi-nodal. Power therefore was not monopolized by the kingly centre, but actively negotiated in conversation with diverse peasant communities and Brahmanical and commercial groups. Ikegame also engages with Nicholas Dirks' research into the importance of kingship in reflecting peasant power in precolonial India. For Dirks, the decline of this martial peasant-dependent kingship in the colonial period (due largely to British policies centring on demilitarization of peasants and rising fiscal pressure on them), and the colonially-aided rise in the power and universalization of Brahmanical caste laws and hierarchies, constituted a revolution in South Asian structures of governance.

Ikegame argues that the early colonial period indeed witnessed a massive transformation of the power structures in Mysore, as a more or less segmentary state form – where the kingly centre subsisted through dialogue with the ruled, and royal revenues were often re-directed back to the localities through largesse-distribution and land-grant mechanisms – began to come under attack from British expectations about government. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century alone, at least 15–20 percent of land revenue assets were allocated in Mysore in the form of *inam*: in Western and Southern India, *inam* was tax-free or tax-privileged tenure given for devotional purposes, charity, public works, and the reward of various services. Together with pre-nineteenth century allocations, this meant that a considerable proportion of governmental fiscal resources

was alienated in favour of local groups and communities by the indigenous rulers of Mysore, something which irritated the British government with its differing expectations about more centralized fiscal discipline. The colonial state started exerting pressure to alter the system. A peasant rebellion in 1830–1831 against colonial revenue maximization policies led to the British taking Mysore virtually under their direct control, which led to a massive crisis of older arrangements of decentralized political economy and the imposition of new forms of centralized revenue extraction. Under colonial rule, Mysore bore the brunt of paying half the total revenue collected from all the princely states.

Where Ikegame parts company with Dirks is in arguing that the older segmentary system did not totally crumble under the colonial onslaught. To substantiate this, her initial focus is on the palace as an institution, and how it managed to retain partial control of largesse-distributing powers, especially to religious and charitable institutions. This in turn enabled the partial continuation of older segmentary forms of cultural economy, which would prove useful to the maharajas of Mysore after powers of state administration were returned to them in 1881, at a time when the princes and landed elites across India were being re-configured by the empire as loyal props of colonial legitimacy. Across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the princely elites of Mysore combined South Asian and Anglo-European forms of education, cultural rhetoric, aristocratic self-assertion, and public ritual (most crucially the Dussehra durbar) to strengthen their power. They used older forms of appealing to local religious-intellectual communities and rural elites, couched in vocabularies of *rajadharma*, as well as newer 'Western' idioms of social 'improvement' and industrial-commercial success to bolster their power. Mysore city, the capital of the princely state, was a microcosm of this transcultural enterprise: a city that was packaged as being

‘modern’ and ‘progressive’, but also simultaneously ‘Hindu’ and ‘traditional’.

To Ikegame’s credit, she does not limit herself to the princely elitist channels of power, but goes into popular contestations and insurgencies against social hierarchies of colonial, princely, and Brahmanical origin. Here her focus is on non-Brahmin politics, and how it emerged through the local communities, kin networks, and *mathas* (monasteries), which even in the colonial heyday retained substantive powers of self-regulation and control of social activities such as education, healthcare, and dispute resolution. These were sometimes instrumental even in coordinating peasant protest and rebelliousness. The resilience of the segmented system of partially decentralized power assumed critical weight in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The peasant networks became instrumental in organizing local communities for purposes of social uplift and assertion of claims to political entitlements. While initially this facilitated the rise of the dominant peasant communities of Okkaligas and Lingayats, it also gradually paved the way for the self-assertion of more subaltern groups as well. Ikegame demonstrates that these communities – and especially their representative *mathas* – adopted kingly markers of legitimacy to assert their claims to sharing governmental authority and power. Taking a cue from the researches of Pamela Price, and basing herself on a wealth of empirical detail, Ikegame suggests that political democratization in colonial and postcolonial Mysore has heavily depended on utilizing moralizing South Asian visions of just and largesse-bestowing kingship, segmented and distributed power, and religiously-charged kingly honour. These have framed the aspirations of subaltern communities for wealth, power, and status.

To the present reviewer, it seems that modern idioms about democratic responsibility of the state to the people emerged in the Mysore region through conversation with older ideals of

(*raja*)*dharma*, and that the growth and endurance of postcolonial democracy owed much to precolonial forms of segmentary power. Can such conclusions also be drawn about other parts of South Asia, including about the non-princely cores of British India? We have to await further research to test such hypotheses. Ikegame’s focus remains on Mysore, though she also invokes some comparisons with other parts of Southern India, as well as with the princely state of Bastar in Central India. But this is a rather minor quibble to make with an otherwise conceptually path-breaking study, which has the potential to transform the field of South Asian historiography. The present reviewer recommends this book to all who are interested in understanding the contribution of precolonial South Asian patterns of segmentary power towards the evolution of modern Indian democracy. Most importantly, the book will fascinate all those desiring a sharper understanding of how extra-European social expectations about governance and modes of popular participation in administration interact with European institutions and ideas of liberal politics in shaping the formation of democratizing public life and global political modernities.

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