

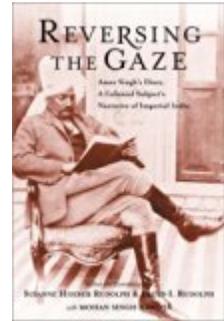
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, Lloyd I. Rudolph, Mohan Singh Kanota, eds. *Reversing the Gaze: Amar Singh's Diary, a Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2002. 650 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3626-8.

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## Days in the Life of a Noble

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The princely states of the Indian subcontinent are enjoying something of a comeback in scholarly attention. Works by Partha Chatterjee on Bengal, Margrit Pernau on Hyderabad, and John McCleod on the western states all point towards this revival. In the same vein, *Reversing the Gaze* adds significantly to this resurgence.

*Reversing the Gaze* is the edited diary of Amar Singh, a Rajput nobleman and an officer in the Indian Army. Remarkably, Singh kept a diary for forty-four years, from 3 September 1898 to 1 November 1942. He missed only one day of writing when he was thrown from his horse and lay unconscious. This work covers Singh's early years from 1898 to 1905. Singh was born in 1878, the son of Narain Singh of Kanota. When he was ten years old, his father sent him to live at the Jodhpur court under the care of Sir Pratap Singh. It was during his time at Jodhpur that he first began keeping a diary; his first entry tentatively called it a "Memorandum Book." Shortly thereafter, likely under the influence of his teacher, Ram Nathji, Singh renamed his book "the diary." From that point onward, his confidence and skill as a diarist grew.

The editors have fashioned Singh's diary into six thematic phases: his early years; his service with the Jodhpur Lancers in China; his becoming a householder; his time in the Cadet Corps; his life amongst nobility; and his time within princely courts.

The editors suggest that, through his diary, Singh is able to "reverse the gaze," and look not only at himself within Indian society, but also at the Raj and its British masters. For example, Singh's career in the army placed him in a "liminal" state, able to reflect on his own experience and that of his British counterparts. This liminal position was aided by the anomalous position of princely state forces serving alongside, and under, the British. Structures of power were clear within the army, yet the powerful and prestigious role of the Jodhpur Lancers was less so. Simply put, questions arose as to who was both in charge militarily, and who (between British and Indian commanders) was "socially superior" (p. 112). It is in this gray zone that Singh's pen was at its sharpest. In July of 1901 as Singh's time in China is concluding, he noted that French officers refer to Indians as "coolies" of their British counterparts as the latter do not salute them. Singh proffered, "I would not like to be treated like a coolie" (p. 159). At the same time, to his own people he had become a "tried warrior" (p. 162).

As the China tour concluded, Singh returned to Jodhpur. His "becoming a householder" and marriage to Rasal Kanwar are detailed in the third part of this work. Details of the wedding provide a glimpse into the accommodation that occurred when Indian customs mixed with newer European ideas and fashions. At the wedding itself, under Pratap Singh's guidance, Amar Singh wore his long leather military boots. These were not comfortable for sitting cross-legged on the floor, so chairs were added

to the ceremonial events. Further, Singh added, "I never understood what he [the Brahman performing the ceremony] was uttering or doing but blindly followed his doing" (p. 171). No doubt this fusion of east and west, and spiritual mystification, continue in countless weddings to this day.

Part IV of the diary traces Singh's time in the Imperial Cadet Corps. In August of 1917, he became among the first to be a king's commissioned officer (KCO). However, after serving in the Third Afghan War, his career in the army ended with his resignation in April 1921 (although this period is not covered in this selection, our editors tell us that Singh's explanation of the event is conspicuously absent from the diary).

While parts I to IV trace Singh's "getting started" in life and his military career, the two concluding parts on patriarchal and imperial space offer details of princely life behind closed doors. For example, with the editors' help, we can see and trace women of the household as they lived in increasingly more desirable rooms of the palace. These reflected their rank within the family. An excellent floor plan of the palace makes this easily grasped. Singh's comments on the birth of his first child, "I do not much care whether the child is a male or a female" (p.

317), or on engaging a mistress, "I said that it was better to marry a second wife than engage a mistress" (p. 335), amply illuminate the intricacies of a noble (and gendered) household.

A few elements of the work might raise a note of critique in an otherwise delightful volume. First, the diary has been rearranged thematically, which might bother purists. Our editors tell us, "Influenced by versions of the postmodern turn in literary and historical scholarship we no longer believe that positive history and public life encompass all of what the diary has to say about meaning and truth" (p. 27). With this, extensive "cutting and pasting" has been done. Second, the work at hand only contains one percent of Singh's writings for the seven years under examination. Some might prefer a broader sample of Singh's work, spread out over more of his life.

*Reversing the Gaze* not only has Amar Singh's wit and observation, but the volume is generously embellished with some seventy photographs, maps and other illustrations. Further, notes, a glossary, family trees, and indexes are provided. This volume will be of interest to historians of the military, of princely states, and of Rajasthan. Further, anthropologists and sociologists will delight in the many treasures held within this remarkable diary.

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