

BOOK REVIEW

Dethroned: The Downfall of India's Princely States

By John Zubrzycki. London: Hurst (dist. Oxford University Press), 2023. 352 pages. Hardback, £25.00 GBP, ISBN: 9781805260530.

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(Received 18 April 2024; accepted 18 April 2024)

Introduction

In recent years, scholarly attention towards the intricacies of Indian decolonisation has burgeoned; yet amidst this surge, certain narratives have remained obscured. Zubrzycki's *Dethroned: The Downfall of India's Princely States* by John Zubrzycki illuminates a pivotal yet understudied chapter in India's journey towards independence: the fate of its princely states. Through meticulous research and penetrating analysis, Zubrzycki unpicks the complexities of princely politics, shedding light on the power dynamics, socio-economic transformations, and enduring legacies that reverberate through this crucial yet often overlooked aspect of India's post-colonial landscape.

By situating the princely states within the broader tapestry of colonial rule and nationalist fervour, Zubrzycki challenges prevailing notions that relegate them to mere vestiges of a feudal past. Instead, he presents them as dynamic entities and active participants in shaping India's destiny. This approach draws upon insights from scholars such as Chatterjee, (1993), whose seminal work explores the complexities of nation building in the aftermath of colonialism. From the opulent palaces of Hyderabad to the remote hills of Manipur, Zubrzycki's narrative traverses the diverse terrain of princely politics, revealing the kaleidoscope of responses to the winds of change sweeping across the subcontinent.

The book uncovers not only the intricacies of princely politics, but also holds greater significance for understanding the complexities of decolonisation and nation-building in one of the world's largest democracies. As it embarks on this journey through the annals of India's history, *Dethroned* emerges not merely as a historical text but as a prism through which we can reconsider our understanding of the broader subcontinent and the nations within it, with India as the main focus.

Contextualising the princely states

Zubrzycki's adept contextualisation of the princely states within the broader framework of colonial rule and nationalist movements serves as the foundational bedrock upon which *Dethroned* unfolds its narrative tapestry. With meticulous attention to historical detail, Zubrzycki embarks on a journey through the annals of time, tracing the origins, evolution, and unique socio-political structures that characterised these princely domains.

At the dawn of the British Raj, India's landscape was dotted with hundreds of princely states, each boasting its own distinct culture, traditions, and governance systems. Far from being homogeneous entities, these states varied widely in size, wealth, and political influence, from the sprawling territories of Hyderabad to the tiny fiefdoms nestled in the Himalayan foothills. Zubrzycki deftly navigates

through this diverse tapestry, illuminating the complex mosaic of princely politics that flourished under the shadow of British imperialism.

Crucially, Zubrzycki unveils the dynamic interplay of forces that shaped their trajectory, from the initial treaties of subjugation with the British to the burgeoning nationalist sentiments that permeated the Indian subcontinent. Zubrzycki underscores their pivotal role in shaping India's destiny and challenges readers to reassess their place within the broader narrative of Indian history.

Agency of princely rulers

Zubrzycki's analysis of princely rulers' agency begins early in British rule. One example is the educational work of Baroda's ruler Gaekwad Sayajirao. He established Baroda College in 1881, which is now the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. This institution not only advanced education but also asserted local identity within the colonial framework. Gaekwad's diplomatic engagements with British officials further showcased his strategic manoeuvring, allowing him to maintain a degree of self-governance and protect Baroda's interests despite colonial oversight.

Zubrzycki's analysis of princely rulers' agency fundamentally reshapes our understanding of their role during the decolonisation era. Contrary to passive figures swept along by historical currents, Zubrzycki depicts princely rulers as dynamic agents who actively influenced events in response to contemporary challenges.

Central to this re-evaluation is Zubrzycki's dissection of the myriad strategies employed by princely rulers to navigate the rapidly shifting political landscape of colonial India. Zubrzycki vividly portrays how Zafarullah Khan's decision to accede to Pakistan, despite the predominantly Hindu population of the state, sparked a geopolitical crisis with India. Through diplomatic manoeuvring and appeals to the Muslim League, Khan sought to safeguard his own interests and preserve his princely prerogatives in the face of mounting nationalist pressures.

During the same period, Zubrzycki's narrative delves into the complexities and contradictions inherent in princely politics. Take, for instance, the case of Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir, whose vacillation between acceding to either India or Pakistan reflects the intricate balancing act undertaken by many princely rulers. Faced with internal dissent and external pressures, Singh's eventual decision to accede to India, albeit reluctantly, illustrates the delicate calculus of princely agency in the face of competing interests and allegiances.

Crucially, Zubrzycki's emphasis on the agency of princely rulers challenges monolithic narratives of colonial domination and resistance. Rather than viewing princely states as passive victims of British imperialism or mere relics of a bygone feudal era, Zubrzycki presents them as active participants in the drama of decolonisation, capable of shaping their own destinies and influencing the broader trajectory of Indian history.

Through his nuanced portrayal of princely agency, Zubrzycki not only enriches our understanding of princely politics but also underscores the broader complexities of colonial rule and nationalist resistance in India. By recognising the agency of princely rulers, Zubrzycki invites readers to reassess their place within the broader narrative of Indian history and acknowledges their role as dynamic actors in the ongoing drama of decolonisation.

Decolonisation paths and socio-economic shifts

By elucidating the intricate dynamics of negotiations, alliances, and conflicts within princely states, Zubrzycki paints a vivid picture of the multifaceted process of decolonisation in India. From the princely state of Travancore embracing social reforms under the visionary leadership of Maharaja Rama Varma Tiruvithamkoor to the tumultuous events surrounding the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, *Dethroned* illuminates the diverse responses of princely rulers to the challenges of colonisation.

Furthermore, Zubrzycki examines how the dissolution of princely states catalysed socio-economic transformations, enriching our understanding of decolonisation. Through detailed research, it elucidates the impact of various reforms, policies, and grassroots movements on the lives of ordinary citizens across princely territories. For instance, in 1951, the abolition of the zamindari system in states like Mysore and Baroda resulted in substantial land redistributions, empowering marginalised agricultural communities and challenging entrenched feudal structures. Additionally, initiatives such as the establishment of cooperative societies and the promotion of industrial development in states like Indore and Gwalior spurred economic growth and social change, though with varying impacts across regions.

Crucially, Zubrzycki's focus on the ground-level implications of decolonisation challenges simplistic narratives of progress and development. While the dismantling of princely states ushered in a wave of socio-economic reforms, it also engendered disruptions, dislocations, and inequalities that continue to reverberate through Indian society to this day. One striking example of autonomous action by a princely state resonating in modern India is found in the historical legacy of Travancore, under the progressive leadership of Maharaja Rama Varma Tiruvithamkoor. During his reign, Travancore implemented groundbreaking social reforms, including the abolition of untouchability, promotion of education, and enactment of forward-thinking legislation. These reforms sowed the seeds for social upliftment, setting the stage for Kerala's contemporary focus on social justice, education, and healthcare. Today, Kerala stands as a beacon of human development, boasting high literacy rates and superior healthcare indicators nationwide. This remarkable trajectory can be directly attributed to the visionary initiatives undertaken by Maharaja Rama Varma Tiruvithamkoor, illustrating the enduring impact of autonomous actions by princely states on shaping modern India's socio-economic landscape.

By integrating the discussions on diverse trajectories of decolonisation with the analysis of socio-economic transformations, *Dethroned* offers a holistic understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the process of Indian decolonisation in 1947. Through his nuanced exploration, Zubrzycki not only enriches our comprehension of this transformative period in Indian history but also underscores the enduring legacies that continue to shape the contours of contemporary India.

Revisiting colonial legacies

Zubrzycki's incisive exploration of colonial legacies serves as a thought-provoking journey into the complexities of post-independence India. Rather than consigning colonialism to the annals of history, it compellingly demonstrates how its echoes continue to reverberate through contemporary Indian society, shaping the nation-building project and shaping enduring tensions and inequalities. The echoes of colonialism resonate throughout contemporary India, leaving a bitter taste of enduring power imbalances and inequalities. Seen in the persistent influence of colonial administrative structures favouring centralisation over local autonomy, these echoes shape ongoing debates on federalism, decentralisation, and regional identity. Additionally, the rich cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of modern India reveals fault lines formed during the clash of colonial imperatives with indigenous identities. These tensions are palpable in ongoing struggles for recognition and representation. In essence, the flavour of colonial echoes, both bitter and sweet, underscores the need to confront historical injustices and envision a more inclusive future. Zubrzycki's exploration urges readers to confront these complexities and pave the way for a fairer and more equitable India.

Zubrzycki delves into the tension between centralisation and regional autonomy, a pivotal aspect of India's political landscape. The analysis reveals how colonial administrative policies favoured centralised control, impacting local autonomy. The legacy of uniform legal codes and centralised power in post-colonial India finds its origins in the power dynamics established during British colonial rule. The British administration implemented policies that prioritised centralised control to facilitate their governance and resource extraction from India. This centralisation permeated various aspects of governance, including the imposition of uniform legal codes and the concentration of political

authority in the hands of colonial administrators. These policies not only shaped the structure of governance during colonial times but also continue to influence contemporary debates on federalism, decentralisation, and regional identity in India today.

Despite the centralising efforts of the British, the presence of princely states introduced complexity to the governance landscape. While some princely states retained a degree of autonomy under British suzerainty, they remained subject to the overarching framework of colonial rule. Although princely states maintained their own legal systems and administrative structures to varying extents, they often faced pressure to conform to British norms and standards. This tension between local autonomy and colonial influence further contributed to the persistence of centralised power and uniform legal codes in post-independence India.

Thus, the legacy of centralised power and uniform legal codes in post-colonial India emerges from the interplay of British colonial impositions and the intricate governance arrangements within princely states. While the British administration significantly shaped the governance framework, the presence of princely states introduced additional layers of complexity and negotiation within that framework. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending contemporary debates surrounding governance, federalism, and regional identity in India.

Moreover, Zubrzycki's exploration extends beyond the realm of governance to encompass questions of statehood and identity in a diverse and pluralistic society. By delving into the histories and experiences of princely states, Zubrzycki highlights the rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that defines India. Yet, he also exposes the fissures and fault lines that emerge when these diverse identities intersect with the imperatives of nation-building, often leading to tensions, conflicts, and struggles for recognition and representation.

Through his nuanced analysis, Zubrzycki challenges readers to confront the unresolved legacies of colonialism and reckon with their implications for contemporary India. By drawing attention to persistent inequalities and tensions, he underscores the imperative of addressing historical injustices and fostering inclusive forms of governance that honour the diversity and complexity of Indian society.

In doing so, Zubrzycki not only enriches our understanding of India's past but also offers valuable insights into its present and future trajectory. By shedding light on the enduring relevance of the history of princely states, he invites readers to engage critically with the complexities of the Indian nation-building project and envision pathways towards a more just, equitable, and inclusive future.

Conclusion

Dethroned stands as a pivotal intervention in scholarly discourse on Indian decolonisation. It broadens the scope of enquiry by foregrounding the experiences of princely states, thus offering a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective on Indian decolonisation, which complements the foundational scholarship of scholars such as Metcalf (2010) on the complexities of inter-state relations between princely states.

In the grand tapestry of Indian history, *Dethroned: The Downfall of India's Princely States* stands as a seminal work that reshapes our understanding of Indian decolonisation. Zubrzycki illuminates a crucial yet often overlooked dimension to India's journey towards independence: the fate of its princely states. By situating the princely states within the larger currents of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance, Zubrzycki illuminates their active participants in shaping India's destiny. Moreover, *Dethroned* transcends conventional narratives of decolonisation by delving into the diverse trajectories of princely states and the socio-economic transformations they underwent. Through his nuanced exploration, Zubrzycki not only enriches our comprehension of this transformative period in Indian history but also underscores the enduring legacies that continue to shape the contours of contemporary India.

As such, *Dethroned* leaves an indelible mark on the field of Indian decolonisation studies, offering valuable insights into India's past and providing a further perspective from which historians can critically engage with its present and future trajectory.

Through its engagement with existing literature and its innovative analytical framework, *Dethroned* not only enriches our understanding of Indian decolonisation but also offers valuable contributions to broader debates within the field of colonial and post-colonial studies. As such, it stands as a seminal work that will undoubtedly shape scholarly discourse for years to come, inviting readers to embark on a journey of discovery into the intricacies of princely politics and the enduring legacies of colonialism in India.

References

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