

Maharanis: The Lives and Times of Three Generations of Indian Princesses. By Lucy Moore. (London: Penguin, 2004; pp. 368, £20.00).

As the fields of women's history, gender studies and feminist historiography are growing, so are the sources available to historians. Non-literary sources which were earlier deemed taboo for scholarly investigation, such as oral histories, interviews or song lyrics, are becoming more accessible particularly for academics and lay historians studying groups which are ordinarily marginalized from larger debates within the public sphere, such as women, aboriginal or so-called 'tribal' communities, disenfranchised socio-economic populations or children. Disciplines such as social anthropology, literary criticism, psychoanalysis and history, among others, are, and have been, challenging the emphasis on 'high culture,' print forms, articulated by dominant, (often male) empowered elites. In addition, literary sources which have ordinarily remained exclusively within the domestic and private arenas, such as women's memoirs, diaries, letters, poetry and fiction, are being incorporated into broader socio-political histories. As mentioned in Kanta Marriott's review of Antoinette Burton's *Dwelling in the Archive* (also in this issue), such 'female' sources are more and more legitimate and essential in writing mainstream histories, let alone women's histories. Lucy Moore's *Maharanis: The Lives and Times of Three Generations of Indian Princesses* is a recent book on royal Indian women, which utilizes many of the sources that Burton championed. It reveals the lives of women, often secluded within the sequestered arena of *purdah* life, to a larger readership.¹

Maharanis chronicles three generations of Indian princesses in late colonial and twentieth century India. Until India's Independence from British colonial rule in 1947, there were some 600 semi-autonomous kingdoms or 'native states,' which covered two fifths of Subcontinent and one third of India's land mass (p. 32). These states were sharply distinct from British India, and had their own forms of local governance, judicial and criminal courts, language, religion and culture. In this book, Lucy Moore narrates the histories of four Maharanis (or queens), who were interrelated through blood and marriage: Maharani Chimnabai of Baroda, Maharani Sunity Devi of Cooch Behar, Maharani Indira Devi of Cooch Behar and the present Rajmata of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi. These personal histories of royal women, all of whom at some time lived in *purdah* (or seclusion) in the palace zenana (women's quarters of the home), also illuminate the cultural, social and political differences between divergent regions of colonial India, from the verdant, lush jungles of Cooch Behar to the dry, flat deserts of Rajasthan and Gujarat. All of these women simultaneously lived international lives, traveling to Europe, Asia and the United States at a time when few Indian women lived abroad. Their life stories are fascinating introductions to an emergent transnational, global identity. While a history of private rites, such as marriage, courtship, mothering and widowhood, *Maharanis* simultaneously illuminates the underlying political nature of royal women as members of dynastic, ruling families. By examining the memoirs, letters, non-fiction and fictional writing by these women, Lucy Moore explores how in certain cases they ruled as Regents during minority administrations, assisted their husbands in the governance of the kingdom, advocated the

rights of women at local and all-India levels, and, in postcolonial democratic India, campaigned and served in political office. While privileged due to their status, their stories are windows into the lives of Indian women during a dramatic century of change: from the height of colonialism, through the nascent birth of nationalism, to the postcolonial republic.

Written chronologically, the book begins with the two eldest Maharanis, Chimnabai of Baroda (1871–1958) and Sunity Devi of Cooch Behar (1865–1932). Both women were educated for their day, concerned with the welfare and betterment of women, and published authors. They founded girl schools, were patrons to women's universities, and championed women's issues on local, national and international platforms. With their similar interests, they often met at venues such as the first Indian's Ladies' Conference in 1906 (p. 122). Sunity Devi was one of the first Indian women to write her autobiography in English and Chimnabai wrote an influential 1911 text, *The Position of Women in Indian Life*, an encyclopedic work which compares and contrasts the ancient women of Greece and Rome, India and Japan and addresses issues of labor and work for women. As Chimnabai wrote in her book: 'the highest aim of women's education should be to fit her to work freely and bravely *with* man; or if not with him, then alongside him, for the benefit of the human race' (p. 101).

Both were wives of leading Indian princes. Chimnabai's husband Sayajirao Gaekwad was the ruler of one of the wealthiest princely states, the 21-gun salute Maratha kingdom of Baroda. He had instated modern hospitals, colleges, universities, museums and railways in Baroda. He has also been well remembered for his subtle forms of resistance to British supremacy, notably in the 1911 Delhi Durbar, and his sympathy for the nationalist cause and advocacy for caste reform, supporting untouchables in his state (famously, he educated B.R. Ambedkar at Columbia Law School. Ambedkar, an untouchable, later went on to become one of the writers of the Indian Constitution). Shortly after Chimnabai's marriage, he gave her a strict routine of study, very unusual for women of her day, both in English and Marathi (p. 42.). The Vicereine, Lady Minto, in 1909 visited Baroda and described Chimnabai as 'very pleasant and hospitable, and ... clever, taking a great interest in politics, and playing a prominent part in the affairs of the State' (p. 97).

Sunity Devi was the daughter of a leading Calcutta intellectual, Keshub Chandra Sen, who had a reformed, theistic interpretation of Hinduism as expressed in the Brahmo Samaj. Sen has been described as the Martin Luther of India, and his mantra was 'One God, One Life, One Wife.' Like Unitarianism, Brahmoism was 'rationalist and egalitarian' espousing that 'mankind could achieve its full-potential – its full perfection-through the union of social reform and superstition-free spirituality. All religions were seen as equally valid' (p. 55). Sunity Devi's spouse, Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar, was brought up as a ward of the British (p. 53). He had a far more Europeanized sensibility, and was popular within high English social circles. It was this merging of Brahmo and anglicized sensibilities that led to their marriage. The Maharaja's English advisor, Mr. John Kneller, desired that his prince and ward marry an educated girl, who

was not in *purdah*. It was he who first looked over Sunity Devi as a potential bride. This is a particularly illuminating incident where members of the colonial administration becoming involved in the personal affairs of Indian princes through the arrangement of marriage alliances (p. 61).

Marriage was certainly always a political arrangement, serving during the pre-colonial period in fostering military and diplomatic compacts both between local princes and hegemonic powers. Sunity and Nripendra's marriage, although described in her memoirs as one of companionship and love, was a dynastic union between two elites, an eastern prince and a powerful nineteenth century Calcutta family, which was advocated and arranged by the colonial government to enhance its project of supremacy. By affiancing a 'native ruler' with a bride in a monogamous marriage, they were clearly imprinting their own beliefs regarding monotheistic religion and Victorian precepts of conjugal love among the young Maharaja.

Sunity and Chimnabai came into closer contact through the marriage of their children. In many ways, Baroda and Cooch Behar could not be more different. They were distant in geography, religious observation, attitudes towards British paramountcy; one was in Bengal on the eastern side close to the center of British India, the other in western Gujarat. When Indira Devi (1892–1968), princess of Baroda, was sent in her later years to boarding school at Ravenscroft in Eastbourne, she quickly befriended the two princesses of Cooch Behar, who were her classmates. Through them, she was introduced to their dashing brother, Jit Narayan of Cooch Behar. Despite being engaged by her parents to the Maharaja of Gwalior, Indira Devi stayed firm in her choice. As Lucy Moore writes, Indira would not accept the transactional view of arranged marriage (p. 15). Described as the 'premier Princess of India, who was giving up everything' for love, her marriage was seen as scandalous (p. 139). For several years, her mother Chimnabai would not see her. Few Indian women let alone royal Indian women had marriages of choice at that time, and Indira Devi flaunted all convention and precedent in doing so.

Moore paints Indira Devi as the most flamboyant of these four women. As a young woman, she 'attracted more than attention, for to describe her beauty as ravishing would by no means be using an overworked cliché. Reporters flocked to [see her], endless photographs were taken' (p. 139). Her marriage with her husband was described in romantic terms as one of 'perfect joy, of happiness, and of bliss' (p. 141). But things were not always placid, and in the early years of her marriage she was financially dependent, having been cut off by her parents and with no allowance given from her husband. Years later she would advise her granddaughters to maintain their own finances, rather than ask 'your husband for money for sanitary towels' (p. 156). Dubbed the merry widow, she was widowed at thirty with five children. She went on to serve as Regent in the minority administration of Cooch Behar state and to lead a colorful life both on the Subcontinent and in Europe, where she had no dearth of suitors, including members of the English royalty, and mixed easily with Hollywood glitterati and the great musicians of her day (p. 183).

Her daughter, the current Rajmata of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi (b.1919), or “Ayesha,” also had a great romance and marriage of choice with the Maharaja of Jaipur. Like her mother, she crossed the entire breadth of India, from the east to the west, after wedding. Unlike Cooch Behar, which did not observe *purdah*, Jaipur as a Rajput kingdom, practiced the traditions of Zenana life very strictly. Educated at Shantiniketan and boarding schools in England and Switzerland, Gayatri Devi had a western-style courtship with the young Maharaja, who was himself already married to two princesses from Jodhpur. It was the polygamous nature of the Jaipur Zenana, which initially concerned Indira Devi over her daughter’s match: ‘she did not like the thought of Ayesha’s being anyone’s third wife and going into *purdah* in an old-fashioned state where her every movement would be restricted’ (p. 204). Though her husband courted her in the nightclubs of Europe and restaurants in metropolitan areas of British India, Gayatri Devi entered a very different world after her marriage in 1940. The Jaipur Zenana housed 400 women including her two co-wives, and the consorts of earlier Jaipur rulers (p. 217). As the Maharani of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi, like her two grandmothers before her, pushed for women’s education, founded several girls schools, encouraged women to come out of *purdah* and endorsed the war effort (p. 223).

Gayatri Devi continued her interest in public life after Independence. In 1962 she campaigned for Parliament and won her seat to the Lok Sabha with an outstanding majority, which won her a place in the Guinness Book of World Records.² When she visited the White House later that year, President John F. Kennedy introduced her as the ‘woman with the most staggering majority that anyone has ever earned in an election (p. 265). Despite her political victories, life in politics was not always rosy. Although she had been a classmate of India’s then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, at Shantiniketan, they had not been particularly close. Indira Gandhi, daughter of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was herself keenly aware of dynastic power and the cult of personality in a democratic state. As a member of the Congress opposition, Gayatri Devi was targeted during Mrs. Gandhi’s purging period of the 1975 Emergency. Without habeas corpus or any form of legal redress, she was incarcerated in the notorious Tihar jail on the outskirts of New Delhi along with Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior (BJP), who was also a member of the Opposition. They were both eventually released.

While Lucy Moore has written an illuminating and provocative book, it is important to note its limitations. Although written as a history, it is not an academic work. Trained as a historian, Moore comes from a journalistic background and she writes for an educated readership, but not necessarily a scholarly one. For that reason, this book does not examine theoretically the larger questions or issues that her findings might reflect. In the tradition of recent popular histories on aspects of royal India, such as Christy Campbell’s *The Maharaja’s Box* and William Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*, or historical biographies of royal women such as Jane Dunn’s *Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens* this work presents a narrative, which is attractive and ultimately very readable, but not an inquiry into larger intellectual paradigms. For instance, she does not establish her observations within current debates on women’s history or the place of these case studies

in late colonial South Asian history and current Indian historiography. Nor does she theorize upon the gender differences between male and female royals and how these distinctions related to outer manifestations in the private and public spheres.

Nonetheless, her book is significant in bringing voices out of the archive and expanding our definitions of what the archive might include. It also illuminates the experiences of women whose lives have been marginalized, both due to their gender and class, as members of the antiquated, bygone world of 'princely India' which has often been neglected in academic histories of late colonial and republican India.

Christ Church, Oxford

ANGMA JHALA

NOTES:

¹ While there has been recent scholarship relating to princely India and Indian kingship, including the work of Manu Bhagavan, Ian Copland, Norbert Peabody, Mridu Rai and Barbara Ramusack among others, very little has substantially delved into the lives of royal women.

² Such political victories in the democratic republic are one of the main legacies of princely India and indigenous forms of kingship in postcolonial South Asia. Gayatri Devi is one of several former royals who have gone into electoral politics.