

INTRODUCTION

One day long ago a young Maharani sat at a latticed window in a palace of white marble and looked out over the silver lake and beyond to the low hills whose slopes the ray of the late afternoon sun had transmuted into purple and gold. But the eyes of the Maharani were not drinking in the glories of the sunset: they were fixed on a crowd on the opposite shores of the water where the lake narrowed to a valley in the hills. She knew what the scene meant, although she could not clearly distinguish the people. For had not her lord and master made a wager with his favourite dancing-girl that she would not walk the width of the lake on a tight-rope, a wager made in a drunken delirium and the reward to be half his kingdom? How she hated the girl and yet shuddered at this cruel test!¹

This 1934 image of the secluded Indian royal woman locked within the stultifying confines of her palace zenana is a recurrent vision of late colonial princely India. The writer paints this Maharani with all the trappings of eastern lore and western voyeuristic fantasy. She is hidden behind the 'latticed' window from the masculine gaze of the imperial observer, and languishes within the hot bed of intrigue, vying with a nautch girl for the favour of her husband. The Maharani is both disturbed by the image of her husband's mistress, yet empathetic to the 'cruelty' of the wager she is playing. In such portraits, courtly Eastern women appear to be the passive, sexual objects of lascivious Eastern autocrats or the pawns of the liberating, enlightened British occupier. Mythologized by colonial literature as lascivious and sensual and reconstructed by the nationalist discourse as silent and secluded, courtly Indian women have invariably been depicted as the object of male desire and conquest, with little or no agency. The English novelist E. M. Forster described the beautiful Hindu Maharani of Dewas Senior as languid and mute, while giving audience to her European guests in only a negligee.² Indian nationalists such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru purported that veiling or *pardah* was a 'barbarous custom' doing incalculable harm on the state of India's women.³ Often portrayed as a dependent and victimized creature, bejewelled and dressed gorgeously only for the eyes of her king and male kinsmen, she is the screen upon which both colonial and nationalist imaginary longings play themselves out in forming conceptions of the Indic 'traditional' or indigenous. Indian women who practised the customs of the zenana and the veil were believed to be 'confined to a life of languid idleness in closed rooms, hidden from view ... suffused with an unhealthy sexuality and a disabling passivity'.⁴

Courtly Indian Women in Late Imperial India poses a challenge to such conventional narratives by arguing that female members of princely households were in fact significant players in colonial governance and postcolonial politics. By probing into the blurry line between the private and the public, the familial and the political, this book attempts to complicate the study of gender, race, royalty and politics in late colonial and twentieth-century South Asia.

Before India's Independence from Great Britain in 1947, two fifths of the subcontinent and one third of the population lived within some six hundred semi-autonomous kingdoms of varying geographical, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Dubbed by the Raj as the 'native states' of princely India, they spanned the foothills of the Himalayas to the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula.⁵ Although the rulers of the princely states controlled significant wealth and power, they have remained largely neglected in mainstream scholarly histories. Perceived as Oriental despots or puppets of the colonial regime, they fall outside the dominant territorial spheres of historical inquiry in British India, where both imperial officials and South Asian nationalists were geographically located.⁶

While the princes have gained recognition with a small cadre of scholars, who have worked assiduously in bringing their histories and contribution to Indian politics out of the archives since the 1960s, these scholars will readily admit that there has been little emphasis placed on courtly women as actors and symbols in the relationship between native states and British paramountcy and, later, independent, republican India. Such an observation has spurred this investigation into the private domestic world of the Indian court, what is termed the 'zenana', and the role of women in it.

The zenana, which translates from the Persian as the 'women's courts' or 'quarters of the palace', was the strictly female sanctum within the larger arena of the Indic kingdom and was an institution adopted by Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist ruling dynasties. In such a structure, women lived behind *pardah* (literally translated as the 'veil' or 'curtain') in seclusion. This book focuses predominantly, but not exclusively, on Hindu Zenanas and the ways in which courtly women displayed and negotiated power during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the colonial period, Zenana women were significant agents in matters of state succession, dynastic alliance and the question of colonial law versus indigenous practice. They served as subtle resisters against British imperialism as well as local, patriarchal hierarchies. In post-independent India, a number of former Zenana women have entered electoral politics and occupy local and national seats of influence, playing a significant role in matters of royal, dynastic marriage and in popular culture, where the mystique and lore of the Zenana lifestyle features in current novels, films and music.

This book argues that the zenana is a crucial arena to critique the intersection between gender, colonialism and modernity through three seminal relationships

of power in late imperial and twentieth-century India. First, it serves as a prism to analyse and elaborate upon the dramatic encounter between the indigene and the foreign imperialist. The meeting between the female 'native leader' and the British was one of dialogue and mutual exchange, far from an essentializing tale of unilateral domination. Second, the politics of the zenana provides a revealing exposition into the shifting strategies courtly Indian women used in resisting local patriarchies, which yields a far more complicated portrait of female political strategy from behind *pardah*. Third, as the later part of the book will explicate, Zenana women play a role in independent India as members of the republican government. While the princely states officially lapsed with Independence, their political ideologies remain alive in those erstwhile members, male and female, who are active in the public life of the nation in the fields of government, tourism, diplomacy, education, law and historic and cultural patronage, among others. In contrast to the image of the passive, subordinate female, this book aims to re-establish the courtly Indian woman as a principal actor and potent symbol in Indian society and history during a crucial century of transformation, from 1890 to 2000.

A Footnote in History: The Indian Princely States

Until 1947, India was divided into two distinct regions: the territories of British India and approximately six hundred semi-autonomous kingdoms. These 'native' or 'princely' states, as they were termed, formed a diverse and powerful polity. Some states were as large as European countries and as wealthy, such as Kashmir and Hyderabad.⁷ Indian kingship itself was not static or homogenous, and each princely state often had its own history, culture, religion, language and kinship groupings, which differentiated it from other 'little kingdoms' as did the zenanas within them. Some upheld primogeniture; others were matrilineal in succession, such as the South Indian kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin.⁸ Certain states had centralized governments (for example Travancore and Mysore), thereby incorporating smaller kingdoms in their way. Others only became clearly established through the influence of the East India Company (such as Jammu and Kashmir).⁹ Their rulers relied on military troops and the support of jagirdars, who received hereditary revenue in return for providing soldiers. For these rajas, alliances with the British were one way to lessen their dependence on the jagirdars.¹⁰

With the treaties of 1818 and the defeat of the Marathas and the Pindaris during the decline of the Mughal Empire, the East India Company emerged as the single paramount power in the subcontinent. The aim of British paramountcy, however, was not to directly rule the whole of India, but rather only those areas which were financially profitable and politically expedient, such as Bengal and the presidencies of Bombay and Madras. For the remaining 'terra incognita', the British implemented a policy of 'indirect rule', which provided a

cheap means of pacifying and subordinating regions not under their own direct control' by forming subsidiary alliances and treaties with the native rulers.¹¹

When asked by the princes for a definition of the vague meaning of paramountcy, the 1928 Butler Commission merely stated, 'Paramountcy must remain paramount'.¹² The idea of paramountcy itself was constantly in flux, and acquired different meanings in varying contexts. As Sir William Lee-Warner, an authority on paramountcy at the end of the nineteenth century, suggested: 'Even if the whole body of Indian treaties, engagements and sanads with all the Native states were carefully compiled, with a view to extracting from them a complete catalogue of the obligations or duties that might be held to be common to all, the list would be imperfect'.¹³

Under the umbrella of the Pax Britannica, the princes held full authority in internal matters of state governance such as taxation, state revenue collection, criminal and judicial law and the development of educational and cultural institutions.¹⁴ However, they could not conduct foreign policy and were obliged to maintain a body of Company troops, which would be stationed in their kingdoms under the control of a British political officer.¹⁵

By the mid-nineteenth century, the crisis of the 1857 Mutiny highlighted the vital role of the Indian princes in Britain's policy of 'indirect rule'.¹⁶ While it can be argued that Dalhousie's earlier strategy of annexing Indian princely states was one of the many grievances leading to the mutiny, some princes also served as important allies for the British at this time of crisis. During the revolt, certain 'patches' of the native states, such as Gwalior, Hyderabad, Patiala, Rampur and Rewa, proved to be 'breakwaters in the storm' which would have otherwise 'swept away' the British, in the words of the first Viceroy Lord Canning.¹⁷

Henceforth, the princes were 'accorded a permanent position as part of the British Empire'.¹⁸ The Queen's 1858 Proclamation which was announced shortly after the events of the Mutiny, sought to "respect the rights, dignity and honour of native princes as our own", because they were the quintessential 'natural leaders' of South Asian society.¹⁹ In shifting from Company to Crown rule, the statement aimed to establish a new social order with the British monarchy as the focus of sovereignty, capable of structuring into a single hierarchy all its subjects, Indian and British.²⁰ It encouraged and embellished a 'language of feudal loyalty' among the Indian princes.²¹

After the Proclamation, the head of the British Government in India acquired the dual title of Governor-General and Viceroy. As Viceroy, he was the Crown's representative in its dealings with the princes of India and their subjects. As Governor-General, he took over control of foreign affairs, defence, communications and coinage for British India, while the princely states were left 'internally autonomous' and guaranteed protection from enemies 'foreign and domestic'. The political agent or resident served as such a representative of the British Raj

within the territorial boundaries of the princely states.²² There were less than twenty residences and agencies scattered across India, generally located in the capitals of the larger states.²³ The agencies maintained large staffs, employing both British and Indian workers.

For this reason, the native Indian rulers saw themselves as being in treaty with the Crown not the administration of British India. As the present Maharaja of Dhrangadhra explains:

The two were distinct, categorical entities. There was no overlap. British India (shown as red on the map) was governed by the Governor-General and it was under the *sovereignty* of the British Crown/Monarch. Indian India (yellow on the map) was overseen ('overawed', if you prefer) by the Crown Representative (a later designation), and it was under the *suzerainty* of the British Crown/Representative. Ruling Princes were sovereign in and over their States.²⁴ [Italics in original].

In 1876, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India during an opening of Parliament. In his speech, Disraeli emphasized the heterogeneity of the princes in regards to race, religion and legal tradition, and eulogized their rare histories as 'highly gifted and civilized'. He claimed that the lustre of these royal lineages rivalled the antiquity of the English monarchy itself. The princes, he intoned, 'occupy Thrones which were filled by their ancestors when England was a Roman Province'.²⁵ Disraeli suggested that these kingdoms represented India's extraordinary cosmopolitanism, which could have no 'coherent community' unless it was incorporated into the 'integrating systems' of the Empire.²⁶

The Delhi Imperial Assemblage held one year later in 1877 to officially crown Victoria 'Empress of India' served even further to associate the Empress's authority and that of the British with India's 'traditional' rulers.²⁷ Lord Lytton, the newly appointed Viceroy and Governor-General, orchestrated the highly ornate ceremony. His hope was that the public pageantry would establish the Queen's authority by placing her rightfully 'upon the ancient throne of the Moguls'.²⁸ Lytton believed that the strong support of the Indian princely order was crucial to the interests of the Crown. The 'native aristocracy of the country', he wrote to Queen Victoria, 'whose sympathy and cordial allegiance is no inconsiderable guarantee for the stability ... of the Indian Empire'.²⁹ Those who attended, some three hundred princes, were seen as the 'flower of the Indian nobility', thanked for their participation in the suppression of the Mutiny and awarded new honours for meritorious service in a similar tradition of 'nazar' or fealty as that which was performed earlier at Mughal durbars.³⁰ The ceremony combined both Anglo-Norman and Mughal conceptions of royalty and visual display.³¹ In Lytton's opinion, the princes were not so much 'representatives of

their subjects' but collaborators celebrating their 'sentiments of attachment to the Crown'.³²

In the subsequent period, a system of 'personal' relationships between the Indian rulers and their British sovereigns, as romantically portrayed in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began to emerge. The adoption and gifting of imperial 'honours', such as medals, gun salutes, seating placement at durbars, orders and knighthoods further tied the Indian princes to their colonial masters. Royal Indian women, such as wives and other female relatives of Indian rulers, were included in this process of 'ornamentation' and were awarded The Order of the Crown of India for meritorious acts of service.³³ At the apex, Queen Victoria had a gun salute of 101, followed by the Viceroy, as representative of the monarch, at thirty-one guns, commensurate with some members of the British royal family. The Indian princes were awarded gun salutes, numbering from twenty-one to nine. The highest-ranking Indian princes at twenty-one guns were Hyderabad, with the greatest population; Kashmir, the largest in territory; Mysore, third in size and population; and Baroda and Gwalior, as remnants of the Maratha legacy.³⁴

As David Cannadine argues, the British Empire was therefore not motivated so much by racist definitions of the Orientalist Other but by class distinctions, hence the Raj felt a natural affinity towards the hierarchically ordered Hindu caste system. The incorporation of the princes into the imperial government was one means towards recreating and perpetuating the ranked stratification of the metropole in its colony.³⁵ At the same time, many of the princes were disinterested and even hostile to this imperial honours system. In 1869, Maharaja Ranmallsinhji II of Dhrangadhra was the first prince in Saurashtra to be awarded a knighthood, which he was reluctant to accept and 'only acquiesced after much urging by his courtiers who pointed out that refusal would grossly insult the Paramount Power and Queen Victoria'.³⁶ Maharaja Sayajirao of Baroda famously turned his back on the English monarchs, King George and Queen Mary, during the 1911 Delhi durbar as a sign of resistance in addition to refusing to wear his Order of the Star of India, the greatest award given to an Indian prince by the British government.³⁷

In 1921, the princes founded their own body, The Chamber of Princes, which provided a forum of dialogue and cultivated 'an environment in which good government became more fashionable'.³⁸ As 'modern' statesmen, they attempted to combine indigenous forms of *rajadharma* (kingly duty) with British models of good governance. Some exercised vital powers in local, regional and all-Indian imperial politics during this period.³⁹

However, the differences between the princes, which Disraeli had eulogized earlier, proved to be too great. Rajput Kshatriya kings in Jaipur and Jodhpur looked down upon the Sudra-descended Maratha kings of Gwalior and Indore,

as well as the Jat-Sikh kings of Punjab (such as Patiala, Nabha and Kapurthala). In equal measure, the Maratha kings, such as Gwalior, retained aged resentment against the Rajputs for siding with the East India Company, which led to their own demise. Even closely related dynasties 'were not immune from vendettas'.⁴⁰ Morvi and Cutch in Kathiawar were locked in a dispute over a piece of the Rann; Patiala with his Sikh kinsman Nabha over the rulership of the *Khalsa*.⁴¹ The ruler of Indore, Tukoji Rao, noted that 'on account of the differences in the education, training, methods of thought, status and position of the Indian Princes, it would be impossible to secure ... unanimity ... on any subject placed before the council'.⁴²

This inability to maintain cohesiveness arguably led to the wane of the princely order and its weakened place in Indian politics by the mid-twentieth century. The period of rapid metamorphosis, which brought modernization, independence and democracy to the new nation, can be interpreted as the twilight years for princely India. The princes were generally characterized as the losers in the battle for power between the British Empire and the Indian nationalists with the resolution of Partition in 1947.⁴³ In the thirty-year period from 1919 to 1947, the lives of the Indian princes were forever altered. At the end of World War I, the princely states were still relatively secure. Indian rulers were admired by their subjects and even by nationalists. In the 1920s, Mahatma Gandhi, whose father and grandfather had served as chief ministers under Indian princes, was himself 'positive' towards the states, which were close to his ideals of Ram Rajya, the 'acme of swaraj'.⁴⁴ Yet, a few years later they were virtually extinct and nonexistent players in the construction of the Indian republic.⁴⁵

While the nation won Independence from foreign rule, the princely states lost their autonomous identities. Rulers were stripped of their executive rights and their territories merged with the new democratic republic. In 1971, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the erstwhile princes lost their last major entitlement, their constitutionally granted incomes, the 'Privy Purse', which was based on an annual percentage of the revenue from their former kingdoms. With the absorption of the princely states, their systems of administration and land tenure were gradually abolished. Nonetheless, many of these erstwhile sovereigns remained active in the public life of the nation, and several women associated with the zenana emerged from *pardah* and entered the body politic.

The Weltanschauung of the Zenana

Since medieval times, the homes of most Indian rulers, both Hindu and Muslim, had two distinct living spaces: the zenana and the mardana. Men resided in the Mardana and women in the zenana. The zenana was the sequestered female quarters of the palace. Originally a Persian institution, which entered India with

Muslim invasions, it altered local customs as Hindu dynasties emulated the mannerisms of the Muslim court. Although the concept of gender segregated living spaces was ancient to India, finding reference in the Sanskrit epics and the *Kama Sutra* as well as Hindu architecture, such as the Rajput fort of Chittor in Rajasthan, it was not rigidly enforced until the arrival of Islam.⁴⁶

During Emperor Akbar's reign there was a marked move towards the confinement of women and the creation of a harem structure.⁴⁷ As he and a number of his descendents married Hindu Rajput princesses, Mughal courtly life and architecture was in turn imitated.⁴⁸ Norman Ziegler notes that the Mughal ruler had great influence over Hindu princes for he 'held a position of high rank and esteem, and the traditions often equate him with Ram, the pre-eminent Kshatriya cultural hero of the Hindu Rajput'.⁴⁹ The traditions of seclusion also influenced Buddhist and Sikh royal dynasties, which came into contact with Mughal imperial forces, such as the Chakma Raj in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Punjab kingdoms.

Just as the princely states were diverse as a group, the zenana itself housed women from several kingdoms, regions and religions, serving as what can be described as a microcosmic 'united nations' within the sphere of the court. This is in marked contrast to the twentieth-century image of the princely states as diffuse and polarized. As the exclusively female quarters in the ruler's palace, each zenana had its own unique history and socio-political identity. It brought together women with different religious, caste, regional, linguistic and clan affiliations, creating a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan world within the already cosmopolitan universe of princely India. Hierarchical and polygamous institutions, Hindu Rajput Zenanas for example, were presided over by predominantly Kshatriya women who were supported by females from Brahmin, Sudra and Vaisya castes as well as Muslims and Jains. During the twentieth century, Christian women also entered the zenana as wives and mistresses of Indian rulers and the courtly aristocracy, and as governesses, nurses and teachers for the children of the household. The zenana was a fluid world of shifting alliances, and, within the span of one reign, unique coalitions of power could emerge. Until the middle of the twentieth century, many royal Indian women still continued to live within the bounds of the palace zenana.⁵⁰

This multi-layered, stratified world inherently blurred the boundaries of the private, sequestered arena of the royal family and the public, political realm of the court within the kingdom. Royal families, by the nature of their histories, lead highly politicized roles. Hence, the 'domestic' or familial sphere, symbolized by the private lives of Zenana women and their children, indirectly or directly influenced the public engagements of the ruler, the affairs of his ministers and the mechanisms of state governance. The 'politics of reproduction',⁵¹ as Leslie Peirce notes in her work on the Ottoman harem, was integral to the underly-

ing dynamics of a royal household, which practised polygamy where there were several sexual partners for the king, including wives, courtesans and women in service capacities. The private rites of women, such as menarche, marriage, courtship, sex and love, pregnancy, mothering and widowhood affected the broader state apparatus of government. When an unmarried princess began to menstruate, it was not purely a private event. It signified the importance of wedding the king's daughter to a ruler of equal or higher rank and the accompanying concerns over spousal selection and the necessary financial expenditure for the ceremony with the requisite pomp and circumstance, which would be deducted from the kingdom's coffers. Certain kingdoms could become bankrupt, if they suffered the marriages of several young royals followed in quick succession.

In addition, a ruler's sexual or personal preference for a particular wife or mistress rearranged the hierarchy of the court around the favoured woman and, in a similar manner, power circulated around the mothers of the future heir and the current Maharaja. The dynamics within the bedroom, the family and the household directly influenced the wider politics of the court. As Ruby Lal notes in her work on the domestic world of the early Mughals, these two spheres invariably overlap: 'everyday activities intersected with historic 'events' in ways which make it difficult to separate the 'private' and the 'public', the 'personal' and the 'political'.⁵² Although traditionally perceived as passive and impotent, Zenana women affected the public transfer of power in both the colonial princely state and the modern republic.

The Political Agent in the Palace: The Colonial Zenana

During the colonial period, the British official gradually came into contact with the workings of the zenana, sometimes acting as a third party observer or participant in succession disputes and marriage alliances. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century political officers, such as George Le-Grand Jacob and Kenneth Fitze, whose work will be cited in later chapters, provide eye-witness accounts of such 'intrigues' and 'rivalries' between feuding factions within the polygamous zenana and the wide network of informants women behind *pardah* had to maintain and augment political authority. These succession rivalries became particularly contentious when the young ruler was a minor.

Furthermore, the practice of *pardah* did not prevent Zenana women from engaging in politics. The Begums of Bhopal, in particular, are examples of powerful female rulers, who governed from behind *pardah* during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over a one hundred year period, four successive women ruled Bhopal state despite numerous threats. They 'were able to distinguish themselves as warriors, scholars, builders, and social reformers' and ensured 'the independence and prestige of their state under British paramountcy'.⁵³ While it should be noted

that the Begums were Muslim heads of state and thus not inherently related to the theme of Hindu Zenanas, their political achievements are expressive of the power of which women were capable of behind seclusion. They also reinterpreted Islamic Koranic law to question the legal precedent for primogeniture.

In addition to appearing unskilled in the tactics of statesmanship, women behind *pardah* were perceived as uneducated and illiterate. On the contrary, a number of Zenana women were important contributors to the arts and letters. Sunity Devi, Maharani of Cooch Behar in the late nineteenth century, was the first Indian woman to write her autobiography in English.⁵⁴ In 1911, her contemporary, the Maharani of Baroda, wrote an important treatise on the role of women, focusing on issues of labour, work, politics and family.⁵⁵ The late Rajmata of Gwalior's mother was the first Nepalese woman to matriculate to university.⁵⁶ They were also influential in educating their children.⁵⁷

The colonial legacy of rule through diplomacy rather than warfare also altered the motivations for marital alliances among the princely families. There are several instances of British government officials who arranged weddings in view of 'westernizing' Indian rulers during the late nineteenth century. In particular, there is the example of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar who married the daughter of the Bengali reformer, Keshub Chandra Sen, a leading member of the Brahmo Samaj, in 1878. The Maharaja's British advisors, Mr Dalton and Mr Kneller, had arranged the meeting between the two families and prospective partners, and it was their approval which sanctioned the union. The marriage is also a striking case of a king who relinquished traditional codes of polygamy in favour of monogamy.

Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Maharaja of Cooch Behar, had been a ward of the British Government since his infancy and was carefully being 'educated' as a model ruler.⁵⁸ His English tutors wanted the young ruler to attend public school in England, but his mothers and other female relations would not agree to his voyage across 'the black waters' unless he was first married in India.

In search of an 'enlightened', educated Hindu bride who was no longer in *pardah*, the Cooch Behar contingent pursued leading Calcutta figure, Keshub Chandra Sen. Keshub Chandra Sen's reformed view of Hinduism, with its emphasis on a theistic philosophy and the abolition of caste, appealed to an Occidental, Christian sensibility. He was also a staunch advocate of the virtue of monogamy, and would not accede to give his daughter without a written promise from the groom to ascribe to this main tenet of his philosophy and convert to Theism. The adolescent Maharaja of Cooch Behar wrote in 1878 this reply to his future father-in-law:

My Dear Sir,

I have been asked to let you know what my honest opinion is on the subject of polygamy.

In reply, I beg to inform you that it has always been my opinion that no man should take more than one wife, and I can assure you that I hold that opinion still.

I give below a statement of my religious views and opinions. I believe in one God and am in heart a Theist.⁵⁹

The influence of British views on morality and conjugal life is evident in this marriage of state. By marrying this eastern Kshatriya ruler to the Sen daughter, the British Indian government believed it was one step closer to modern progressivism and western enlightenment. Indeed, even members of the British aristocracy and royal family became involved in the politics of 'arranged marriage' for Indian princes, and their ideas of companionate marriage changed the motivations for personal unions. These alliances are expressive of the linking of two parts of India, the autonomous tracks of the princely states with the suzerainty of the British paramount powers. They are also indicative of how disparate and distinct communities and regions of the sub-continent could be joined under the unifying banner of the imperial Raj.

Zenana women also manipulated colonial intervention and resisted regional patriarchies in making and breaking marriage alliances for their children. At the turn of the twentieth century, the widowed Hindu Rajput Ranis of Rajkot and Palitana in peninsular Gujarat successfully leveraged the influence of the paramount power in their favour to fend off the male relations of spurned bridegrooms. They worked with various levels of the Raj bureaucracy, at times culling the support of higher ranked members of the colonial government if their own local British administrators were not supportive of their views, even petitioning the Viceroy. They simultaneously co-opted the language of western conjugality and romance to justify the suitability or inappropriateness of certain marital matches. In such discussions, the British official was often caught in a dilemma whether to support 'modernist' ideals of the European, companionate marriage or uphold customary (often patriarchal) tradition.

In addition to new ideas relating to the appropriate brides for Indian princes, the role of the colonial subject in arranging unions and Zenana women's own manipulation of the language of anglicized love and courtship, Indian royals began marrying European men and women. As early as 1800, a Muslim aristocrat had married an Englishman,⁶⁰ and the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw more than twenty Indian rulers, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, marrying Caucasian women.⁶¹ The role of race became contentious in the nuptials of Indian princes to women who did not belong to their same religious, class or caste background. White women were particularly problematic as they often defied all four categories, which affected dynastic succession. The British colonial administration did not favour miscegenation at any time, and tried to prevent such weddings with harsh warnings. The Maharajas of Indore, Pudukkottai and Kapurthala, among others, chose love over political prudence. In certain cases,

they abdicated their sovereign powers, entered morganatic marriages, altered the line of succession and lived abroad in order to marry such 'impermissible' brides. As Rosalind O'Hanlon notes, sexuality was not merely a private or individual sensibility: 'Sex and gender, public and private, masculine and feminine were linked in the processes through which colonial states could transform sexual identities and the moral realms in which they lived'.⁶²

With Independence, marriage alliance-making went through further transformations, with the socialist agenda of the Nehruvian state and later the growing emphasis on business enterprise and commercialism fostering novel translations of the desirable conjugal partner in royal circles. At the same time, Zenana women entered electoral politics and more visibly influenced the new political theatre.

Emerging out of *Pardah*: Zenana Women in Postcolonial Politics

Although the princely states are described as having faded away from the political scene, many erstwhile rulers remain active in modern South Asian politics. The zenana itself evolved with the emerging change in the status of the Indic kingdom. Women who once lived behind *pardah* gradually came into public life and a number embarked upon political careers as elected members of government, such as Vijaya Raje Scindia, Rajmata of Gwalior, and Gayatri Devi, Rajmata of Jaipur. Both born in 1919, they lived in hierarchical, polygamous zenanas behind *pardah*. In the wane of empire, they performed the duties of Maharanis while their husbands were still rulers in the 1940s, and experienced the transfer of power, when the princes were stripped of privileges and rights. In their later years, they became politicians in democratic India, campaigning for election, scoring records in the polls with the number of the votes they garnered, and effecting party policy. Both women experienced the horrors of the 1975 Emergency and were incarcerated in the infamous Tihar jail as members of Indira Gandhi's Congress Opposition. The zenana worldview has been described as often outmoded and anachronistic in the post-Independence period, no longer applicable to contemporary India. The life histories of these women, as only two of many examples, question this view. Representing the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Jan Sangh, Congress, Swatantra and other independent political parties, former Zenana women appear to represent a wide spectrum of political thought and its attendant constituencies.⁶³

In pre-Independence India, women of the zenana mainly acquired power through covert and subversive means. Behind *pardah*, there existed a sophisticated system of political intelligence and intrigue, as noted earlier. In contrast, since Independence, the political arena has dramatically altered. Former Zenana women no longer maintain implicit, *pardah* rule, but instead operate through the public display of campaigns, elections and politicized dialogue through the vehicles of film, the media, autobiographies and fiction.

Even after the demise of the princely state, these women and their families continue to hold the symbolic and sometimes the real power of an erstwhile ruler, affecting policy and change in contemporary India. These observations have led to the following questions: what was the worldview of the zenana? How did women during the colonial period augment and finesse power both within traditional patriarchal circles and against a foreign, colonial force? How did female rulers as regents or ruling sovereigns manifest authority? How did private rites such as marriage and childbearing affect matters of 'state' importance such as succession and political alliance? What was the education of Zenana women as natural 'leaders'? In the postcolonial period, how have Zenana women who have entered a political sphere shaped contemporary Indian politics and gender identity? Did the traditions of hierarchy and power dominance played out behind the zenana walls help or hamper these women to be affective politicians and leaders in a democratic system? These are among some of the many questions this book shall pose, which have not been addressed in the existing literature.

Framing the Debate: Critiquing Orientalism and the Hollow Crown Paradigm

A crucial element of this study is the way in which indigenous courtly women were objectified by colonial legal and social systems even while being made into subjects by them. It inherently critiques the project of orientalism and the 'Hollow Crown' paradigm, in examining the relationship between native rulers and the paramount power, which was more nuanced than a simple story of dominance and mimicry, pageantry and parody or silence and objectification. The meeting between the British and the peoples of the empire was that of an encounter, however skewed.⁶⁴

Recent contributions in the fields of literature, psychoanalysis, anthropology, gender and culture, which have been categorized as 'postcolonial' or 'postmodern', have delved more into the experience of colonized people, and have deconstructed the relationship between the Occident and the Orient within a paradigm of hegemonic domination.⁶⁵ With the publication of Edward Said's influential *Orientalism*, the western academy has focused predominantly on Europe's rewriting of the East. As Said wrote: 'It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries.'⁶⁶ While this work does not wish to undermine the atrocities and abuses associated with empire, it hopes to suggest that the relationship between imperial nations and those they encountered was more heteroglossic, hybrid, ambiguous and paradoxical.

Certainly, the 'impenetrable' courtyards of the sequestered zenana appeared to be a 'dangerous space' (as was much of princely India) for western observers and colonial officials, in part because they were inaccessible. Popular colonial writings deftly 'orientalized' the Hindu Maharani or the Muslim princess as much as they did their male royal compatriots. This Orientalist interpretation of an indigene robbed of his 'voice' by the colonial 'author' fuels the perception that the Indian prince was emasculated during the colonial encounter. Nicholas Dirks' earlier groundbreaking work on the 'little kingdom' of Pudukkottai in South India, while bringing the Hindu kingdom into central focus within the fields of history and anthropology, has been a leading proponent of the hollow crown theory. He has argued that the colonial Indian kingdom was a 'hollow crown' upon an empty political stage.⁶⁷

Such analyses, while significant in highlighting the neuroses of empire, eclipses the possibility that the colonizer and colonized were engaged in a much more spirited dialogue of mutual exchange and dialogue.⁶⁸ Several scholars have questioned this 'hollow crown' model.⁶⁹ John McLeod in his work on paramountcy in the princely states of western India observed that the princes were neither puppets nor collaborators with the British. With rulers collecting revenue at pre-colonial rates and no longer needing to upkeep military expenditures, they became 'real kings', far from the Dirksian hypothesis. As he suggests: 'even those who saw the princes as in some way illegitimate holders of power had to recognize that they did indeed possess real power, although its nature was changed from pre-colonial days.'⁷⁰ Manu Bhagavan's work on education, modernity and the princely states suggests 'that denizens of princely states had the ability to map nationalist imaginaries within and onto their state and state-supported institutions, to initiate internal improvement and change to envision their own modern realities, and to thereby contest colonialism in ways that were distinct to the particular local context.'⁷¹ More general works such as Ian Copland's *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire* and Barbara Ramusack's ambitious volume, *Indian Princes and Their States* brings the subject into mainstream South Asian historiography.⁷² These works highlight the relevance of the Indian kingdoms as real, political forces in colonial and postcolonial India.

Thus, the story of the colonial encounter was not one-sided but in certain instances resulted in a dialogue of reciprocal rapport. Similarities of class tied Europeans with non-Europeans rather than differences of race. A prince was seen as a prince, whether he was a Hindu Maharaja or a Hawaiian chief, and was therefore perceived to be a social equal to a European monarch. In this respect, the British royal family, from Victoria to Elizabeth II, mixed comfortably with Indian princes both in Britain and the native states (at least in the setting of the dinner party if not that of the bedroom). In July 1999, when Prince Charles eulogized the recently deceased King Hussein of Jordan, he described his friend

as a 'social equal whose high rank dissolved racial differences: "a wonderful combination of the virtues of the Bedouin Arab and, if I may say so, the English Gentleman"⁷³. In certain instances, class thus served as a greater indicator of power than race.⁷⁴ According to David Cannadine: 'We should never forget that the British Empire was first and foremost a class act, where individual social order took precedence over collective racial othering.'⁷⁵ Indeed, the relationship between Zenana women and British officials reflects this more fluid exchange of cultural attitudes, religious practices and legal provisions during the high noon of empire.

Placing the Zenana in the Context of the Debate on Tradition versus Modernity

Alongside this discourse on the 'hollowing' of royal power, South Asian historiography has focused on the invention of tradition and the challenge of modernity in late colonial India. For British administrators, Orientalist scholars and South Asian nationalists, the debate on tradition 'marked the study of Indian Society and culture.'⁷⁶ Indeed, both the Indian prince and the eastern woman were contested sites in this debate, and the Zenana female was therefore doubly the object of colonial and nationalist constructions on what fundamentally represented the 'Indic' spirit.

Several scholars have argued that Indian social tradition was largely a nineteenth-century British colonial invention.⁷⁷ Ronald Inden, following in the wake of Said's *Orientalism*, has argued that there were certain 'essentials', which constituted Indian 'tradition'. Divinely construed kingship was one such essence.⁷⁸

Early British officials ranked and graded Indian social hierarchies in an effort to understand them.⁷⁹ The work of colonial historians and political administrators such as James Mill or Edmund Burke attempted to get at the heart of what defined Indian tradition. James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* came to be read as one such foundational history for Hindu kingship and Rajput 'feudalism'. James Tod (1782–1835) was the first political agent for the western Rajput states in 1818, having earlier served as the British Resident at the court of Daulat Rao Sindhia of Gwalior from 1805.⁸⁰ During his time in Rajasthan, he was deeply moved by the mythic history and fiery courage of the Rajput aristocracy and royalty. A keen ethnographer, he wrote a compendious multivolume work on the histories of the Rajput dynasties based on his travels, which provided detailed clan histories and lineage charts, arguing that the Rajputs were descended from Sanskritic heroes and Hindu gods. For him, the Rajputs reflected the 'essence' of the Hindu political state.⁸¹ He believed them superior to the European feudal families in their expression of chivalric virtue and as emblematic of a dying heraldic age. He wrote in the *Annals*:

If we compare the antiquity and illustrious descent of the dynasties, which have ruled, and some, which continue to rule, the small sovereignties of Rajast'han with many of celebrity in Europe, superiority will often attach to the Rajpoot. From the most remote period we can trace nothing ignoble nor any vestige of vassal origin. Reduced in power, circumscribed in territory, compelled to yield much of their splendour and many of the dignities of birth, they have not abandoned an iota of the pride and high bearing arising from a knowledge of their illustrious and regal descent.⁸²

As Varsha Joshi suggests, Tod's main objective was 'to introduce Rajputs to western readers and to portray them in a romantic, adventurous and at the same time often cruel light ... [which] reflected nineteenth-century notions of medieval feudalism and chivalry'.⁸³ Inden corroborates this view: 'Tod depicted the Rajput 'system' as an early, pristine form of governance, the essence of which was princely feuding, thick-skinned and hot-headed'.⁸⁴

These critiques of Tod perpetuate the very relationship between the colonizers and colonized which orientalism exposed and attempted to deconstruct, by keeping India 'eternally ancient and passive'.⁸⁵ If the colonial subject was responsible for the construction of the Indic Other, in such methods as the 'historicizing' and ranking of indigenous rulers in Tod, the arrangement of vice-regal durbars or the gifting of orders of merit, then ultimately the colonized, even those of an elite group such as the Indian rulers, were silenced actors in a colonial political drama.⁸⁶

Such an interpretation of Tod, as reflecting the essence of Hindu kingship and rendering it vulnerable to the colonial Self, is incomplete. It remains 'blind' to how the colonized borrowed categories from the Indological discourse for their own purposes. Tod highlights a multiplicity of distinctions between varying local indigenous groups not any one 'essence' of traditional kingship.⁸⁷ As David Washbrook expands, the colonial translation of such 'traditional' components did not 'simply invent them: if they were products of the 'imagination', it was of an imagination shared between colonizers and certain groups, at least, among the colonized'.⁸⁸ Not only was the relationship between the paramount power and the indigenous prince far more complicated than a simple oppositional paradigm, but so were the relationships between varying colonial subjects themselves.

By virtue of being female, Zenana women were doubly the objects of this investigation into tradition, both as women and as princely members representing the 'essence' of indigenous leadership. In an environment where tradition and modernity are both carriers of patriarchy and thus artificial constructs of colonialism,⁸⁹ women became 'emblematic of tradition'.⁹⁰ In her insightful critique of colonial and indigenous patriarchal readings of *sati*, or widow immolation, in nineteenth-century Bengal, Lata Mani articulates that the identity of the Indian woman is lost in a larger debate on tradition, where tradition becomes equated

with scripture.⁹¹ Both colonial administrators and indigenous male elites advocated the prohibition of *sati* by privileging scriptural evidence over customary practice.⁹² Either as victims or pathetic heroines, Mani suggests, Indian women become emblematic of tradition for both the colonialists and the emergent nationalists. But women themselves were lost in the debate; they had no voice in a discourse, which was about them but did not include them.⁹³

The subaltern critique on gender studies has furthered this distinction between discussions about women and their own ability to participate in such debates. Gayatri Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' proposes that the woman literally 'disappears' and is written out of the text or the lived historical experience. She challenges that 'between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernity'.⁹⁴ Partha Chatterjee extends Lata Mani's conclusions in his discussion on women in the Indian nationalist movement. He argues that Indian nationalists in an attempt to reject westernized values created separate spheres, which preserved an Indic nature as distinct from the European self. He conceptualizes this paradigm in the symbolism of inner/outer, *ghar* and *babir*, or the world and home. The outer arena is material, rationalist and ultimately masculine; in contrast, the inner world of the home embodies the feminine spiritual integrity of the nation.⁹⁵ Nationalists, such as Mahatma Gandhi, saw Indian women's qualities of self-sacrifice thus as expressive of the nation's spirit itself, which was neither 'weak' nor 'effeminate'.⁹⁶ As the mother of Indian men who will people the nation and as the living manifestation of religious observation, the woman is a foundational figure in the nationalist cause. Thus the preservation of the 'traditional' woman corresponds to the protection of Indian values from the impurities of the West, and reflects indigenous men's moral superiority over European imperialists.⁹⁷ While Chatterjee's arguments are important, they are problematic as they define the political and private in a model of masculine and feminine spheres, which do not overlap. In his critique, the woman still lives within the feminized realm of the family, which is divorced from the outer space of state governance, *realpolitik* strategy, and engagement with the colonial power or resistance to local patriarchies. Spivak's reading is highly sophisticated in placing the woman squarely at the heart of the tradition versus modernity debate, but it fails to acknowledge that women did speak as active agents. As Durba Ghosh notes in her work on native women in colonial India, Spivak suggests that the absence of female subaltern subjectivity in the colonial records poses 'insurmountable obstacles' to writing subaltern histories, but provides no insights into how these kinds of archival shortcomings can be overcome or how the exclusion of women's names could be 'historically informative about native women's encounters with various parts of the colonial

enterprise.’⁹⁸ In many ways, these theories keep the woman in ‘shadows’ even by noting that she is in the shadows. Rather, the literature on the *zenana* reveals that women did speak and are still speaking.⁹⁹

Indeed, the private sphere of the family was very much part of the outer political realm of the Indian kingdom, sometimes obliquely, other times explicitly. Tanika Sarkar in her work on Hindu women and nationalism suggests that nineteenth-century Bengali household management mirrored external politics; just as a king ruled a dominion, so did a woman her household.

Management of household relations becomes a political and administrative capability, providing training in governance that one no longer attains in the political sphere. The intention is to establish a claim to a share of power in the world, a political role that the Hindu is entitled to, through successful governance in the household. A possibly unintended consequence, however, is that, in the process it also renders household relations into political ones.¹⁰⁰

Royal women in particular lead innately politicized lives and actions within the ‘household’ are not merely ones of an internal, ‘spiritual integrity’ but affect an external system of governance.

In part the problems associated with this historiography on the colonial invention of Indic tradition rests on the kind of sources available to South Asian historians or the ways in which scholars use these sources.¹⁰¹ Much of this history is situated in British India, particularly Bengal, and does not reference the princely states, several of which until Independence maintained internally autonomous governing structures and resisted colonial paramountcy both by upholding their treaties of non-intervention with the British and by subverting them. In addition, there are problems with the mode of literary analysis being used. As Peabody and Mani argue, the misreading of so-called fundamental or ‘essential’ texts leads to incomplete conclusions. Following along the lines of Durba Ghosh’s innovative and important work on sexuality, domesticity and race in early colonial India, this book reinstates the voices of indigenous women ‘to inhabit their own histories’ and thus ‘break down and resist, rather than reinstate, some of the gender, class, race hierarchies that constituted the structures of colonial societies’.¹⁰²

At the same time, the colonial project of essentializing Indian tradition went hand in hand with a modernizing agenda. The two concepts were not mutually exclusive.¹⁰³ Several scholars have argued that the ‘modern’ was expressed in relationship with ‘tradition’ not as its fundamental opposite but as a constitutive element of being modern. Saurabh Dube critiques the essentializing aspects of these constructed oppositions between East and West, Modernity and Tradition. As he suggests:

The implications of these binaries and the seductions of this blueprint have constituted the undersaid and the under-thought of academic disciplines, a part of reigning metageographies. They inculcate dispositions toward mapping modern peoples and places in history and charting traditional communities and customs out of time. They cultivate inclinations toward plotting native peoples in their passage to progress, the grand transition from enchantment to disenchantment, from tradition to modernity. They generate sensibilities toward rendering 'authentic' communities as changeless and entranced, already before history and always beyond the modern.¹⁰⁴

As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued the past is an integral element in understanding South Asian modernity.¹⁰⁵ He notes in *Provincializing Europe* that Bengali nationalist thought on colonial domesticity and women's education combined elements of the public and the private, domestic and national, modern and traditional. The *grihalakshmi*, the ideal prototype for the nineteenth-century Bengali woman, was meant to adopt European virtues of household cleanliness, health and hygiene, post-industrialist conceptions of time and Victorian ideals for women's education while at the same time maintaining the family unit and traditions of the *kula* or clan. Advocacy of western education for Bengali women was premised on this idea of balance. These women would have enough European-stylized learning so as to be 'pleasant' and diminutive in speech with their in-laws but not so much that they might defy the traditional (patriarchal) authority of the *kul* through outspokenness, selfishness or laziness. Thus western education reconstructed the Bengali woman as cultivated and pleasant, unlike her uncouth, uneducated compatriots, but at the same time situated her within the boundaries of traditional feminine modesty and domestic roles, unlike her feminist western counterparts.¹⁰⁶

In his examination of the middle class in colonial Lucknow, Sanjay Joshi extends this argument, revealing 'multiple, often contradictory, pressures' in which 'traditional' ideas played a role in the construction of 'modern' ideas about religion, community, gender relations, and the nation.¹⁰⁷ For instance, Joshi notes that middle class men's ambitions to 'improve' women through 'modern' ideas about female education and emancipation emerged alongside initiatives to reiterate older patriarchal norms, notably the idea of the woman as *patriivrata* who lives to serve her husband.¹⁰⁸ Such narratives on colonial constructions of womanhood drew upon both the vocabulary of western liberalism and indigenous patriarchal traditions.¹⁰⁹ While bringing together the traditional and the modern, and the Indian and the European, colonial middle class interventions 'created a modernity where both Manu as well as Mill and Macaulay could be points of reference.'¹¹⁰

Thus British paramountcy not only incorporated aspects of tradition, such as the Indian feudal system lauded by Tod into its policy of 'indirect rule', but also advocated British forms of progress and modernity to transform native socie-

ties, just as traditional societies incorporated western practices while preserving other constitutive elements of the 'traditional'. The British sought to 'maintain India as a feudal order' while simultaneously 'looking towards changes which would inevitably lead to the destruction of this feudal order'.¹¹¹ They needed Indian aristocracies to legitimate crown rule in India. At the same time, they endorsed modernizing tendencies, which would provide a new kind of 'civic or public order'.¹¹² Towards this aim, British administrators encouraged princes to adopt progressive measures in the administration of their states. These projects for 'good government' included the building of public health facilities based on western medicine, instituting legal reform for women, particularly in regards to *sati*, widow remarriage and the marital age of consent, constructing railways, telegraphs and ports, opening European styled schools and universities, and laying the foundation for representative assemblies.¹¹³

However, the British were not always pleased by the outcomes of such hybrid modernizing trends. In certain cases, princes who were educated in English styled public schools sympathized more with western mores than their own. They subverted the hierarchy of difference between East and West, Other and Subject, by marrying white women or adopting more anglicized attitudes to dress, behaviour, language or alcohol consumption than the British themselves.¹¹⁴ The Indian prince, who neglected ruling his own kingdom to sunbathe on the beaches of the French Riviera or socialize with Hollywood glitterati, became the bane of existence for many a British political officer and native state minister, let alone the women of the courtly household. Such native princes crossed the racial and ethnic divide of superiority/inferiority, believing themselves Englishmen in mind and thus equal to the colonial ruler himself politically and socially. Simultaneously, he was, by virtue of rank, a monarch outside the bureaucratic policies or legal systems of British India and thus above and beyond it.¹¹⁵

The paramount power was similarly contradictory in its position towards 'modernizing' Zenana ladies. The British endorsed 'traditional' practices in regards to marriage alliance and succession law, but introduced western ideals of conjugality and education. In the same instance that they tried to prevent European women from marrying Indian princes, they encouraged indigenous rulers to marry anglicized high caste and class Indian women. Like the Mughals, British administrators upheld 'traditional' primogeniture in relation to religion, yet the Anglo-Indian legal system, which gave equal rights to women in the courts, created the basis by which Zenana women questioned legal precedence. They critiqued *pardah* as a custom, which rendered Zenana females docile and subjugated in their eyes, yet they simultaneously were scandalized by those palace ladies who broke with the veil. They encouraged widowed Ranis to serve as regents during the minority administrations of their sons, and yet distrusted the influences of the zenana on the upbringing of young princes.

Thus, as both prince and woman, the courtly Indian female was seen as an outmoded and anachronistic member of an 'antique', political structure at odds with the modernizing tendencies of colonialists and nationalists. Nonetheless she retained political importance for both groups: as repositories of 'tradition' for the British, and as the inner space of the 'indigenous' for the nationalists. These descriptive evaluations, however, still based the discussion of the zenana upon masculine discourses, whether colonial or Indian. The voices of Zenana women themselves are full of even greater paradoxes, which do not fit into neat classifications.

The Use of Sources

As the fields of women's history, gender studies and feminist historiography are growing so are the sources available to historians. Non-literary materials which were earlier deemed questionable for scholarly investigation, such as oral histories, interviews and song lyrics, are becoming more accessible, particularly to academics and lay historians studying groups, like women, who were previously marginalized from broader debates. Disciplines including social anthropology, literary criticism, psychoanalysis and history have challenged the emphasis once placed on 'high culture', print forms, articulated by dominant, empowered elites.¹¹⁶ In addition, literary sources which have ordinarily remained exclusively within the domestic sphere, such as women's memoirs, diaries, letters, poetry and fiction, are being incorporated into socio-political histories. As Antoinette Burton points out in *Dwelling in the Archive*:

What counts as an archive? Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories that domestic interiors, once concrete and now perhaps crumbling or even disappeared, have the capacity to yield? And, given women's vexed relationship to the kinds of history that archives typically house, what does it mean to say that home can and should be seen not simply as a dwelling-place for women's memory but as one of the foundations of history -history conceived of, that is, as a narrative, a practice, and a site of desire?¹¹⁷

In trying to bring the lives of Zenana women into a discourse on history, this project mines the archive as much as it can by utilizing a wide variety of sources. For colonial material, it references inventories and histories of British India and the princely states. In particular, it draws on the work of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, who served in some capacity within the princely states as British officials. In addition, the Political Department Records of the Residents' Reports from the Princely States have revealed an ocean of material including oral evidence from law trials in the Bombay courts, letters between Hindu Ranis and British officials regarding the making and breaking of marriage alliances in western Indian kingdoms, and expenditure lists for various public duties, including the annual allowances for royal women, the costs for betroth-

als, marriages and coronations and the state funds required for the education of minor princes. These records are particularly useful for accessing private events, customs and ceremonies during the colonial period, which often go unrecorded. It must be kept in mind, however, that the political residents' reports were official correspondence and are thereby invariably coloured by the political motivations, cultural prejudices and social objectives of the imperial protocol established at Delhi or Calcutta. As much as is possible, this book cites the original letters, speeches or depositions of courtly women and Indian princes found within the residents' reports to allow their voices to be heard directly.

For twentieth-century materials, the study incorporates anthropological accounts, biographies, autobiographies, oral histories, journalistic interviews, letters, diaries, exercise notebooks and educational records. Oral histories, in particular, dramatically bring to life the hierarchy, customs and day-to-day lifestyle of women in zenana structures. It seeks to address questions about royal women's lives, which have been missing from an academic discourse, especially their private marital and sexual experiences. While such histories are limiting in their time frame and highly subjective, they are nonetheless helpful for charting the changes that evolved in the twentieth-century zenana. As Bernard Cohn notes in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, 'history can become more historical in becoming more anthropological, particularly in regards to modern South Asian studies.'¹¹⁸

Biographies and autobiographies are equally important. This study principally incorporates the memoirs and biographies of Zenana women from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the Maharanis of Jaipur, Gwalior, Cooch Behar and Baroda. These are illuminating works, providing rare descriptions of experiences, familial, political and private, of women who have lived in *pardah* through their own eyes. Interestingly, a number of these women who wrote autobiographies were also interrelated through marriage or birth, and thus shed light on a whole generation of women across India.

It is worth mentioning, too, both the advantages and limitations of personal historical narratives as source material. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson provide an useful analysis of oral history and memoir in their introduction to *Narrative and Genre*. With the advent of a move from deconstruction to post-modernism, advocated by a small but influential group of radicals in the 1980s, the autobiography became interpreted as a purely literary and subjective genre, 'in which there was no longer a biographical self capable of reflection, or a biographical reality upon which to reflect. Hence reflection itself was merely ideology; and autobiography totally fictional.'¹¹⁹

This observation highlights the autobiography's nebulous place between fact and fiction. As Chamberlain and Thompson question, 'How far should it be read as a narrative of real experience, and how far as a form of fiction?'¹²⁰ This is

one of the principal problems an historian faces when dealing with the memoir as a source. As any source, the memoir is neither infallible nor objective, and a scholar must be aware of the subjectivity of these personal histories. On the other hand, nearly every life is heightened by colourful anecdotes. Who can legitimately be the writer of a categorical truth? If the memoirist cannot tell her tale without some embellishment, no one can. We must merely keep this in mind as historians. The autobiographies cited in this work focus on the personal relationship between the female author and her audience. They simultaneously strive to tell stories, which are private, of families, romances, marriages and mothering, and highly public, the roles of queens in courtly affairs, the agendas of elected politicians and the doctrines of political parties.

This rich array of diverse sources in dialogue with each other begins the process of unearthing the lives of courtly women at the height of empire. There are many stories, which, due to the limitations of this book, cannot be fully told here. It is the hope that this work will be the catalyst for yet more histories of this understudied area.

Filling a Scholarly Lacuna

While an interest in princely India has been growing, there are few histories of the zenana. Pamela Price's research exposes the role of royal Hindu women in litigation trials over succession and property disputes, but does not establish its larger implications for the nature of female royal charisma in colonial South India.¹²¹ Varsha Joshi's *Polygamy and Pardah* provides rich material on Hindu Rajput women, but is focused predominantly on medieval and early colonial Rajasthan.¹²² Lindsay Harlan's ethnography on *Religion and Rajput Women* provides a window into the role of Hindu ritual and devotional practice for contemporary Rajput women, but she does not place her work within specific historical paradigms, state formations or political processes.¹²³ There have been revealing histories of Muslim royal dynasties, such as the work of Ruby Lal and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, which focus on the Mughal harem and the Begums of Bhopal respectively, but they do not address more broadly the role of courtly Indian women in the period under investigation.¹²⁴ In addition, this work builds upon the recent contributions of historians in complicating the narrative on interracial relationships between indigenous men and women and Britons in early colonial India, such as Durba Ghosh. But unlike Ghosh's work, this book focuses predominantly on late colonial indigenous women who did not enter colonial households as companions to Englishmen.¹²⁵ As Barbara Ramusack admits: 'the agency of elite and non-elite women in princely states during the colonial era begs for further analysis.'¹²⁶

Courtly Indian women are more likely to be found in the pages of popular histories than their academic cousins. A slew of recent historical biographies, which read with the ease of investigative journalism, have focused on the romantic lives

of princely women, Hindu and Muslim, Indian and European.¹²⁷ In addition, a number of Zenana women have written memoirs, educational tracts and fictional works.¹²⁸ However, neither these biographies nor autobiographies have critically examined the political worldview of women in the zenana, as mentioned earlier.

Royal Indian women have also found themselves in the plotlines of historical fiction and the films they have engendered. While several of these novelistic renditions have been based upon oral histories of living descendents of the zenana, they do not analyse the time in which these women lived nor the concerns they faced.¹²⁹ Others have been adapted into films to critical and popular acclaim, by portraying the lives of English women and men who married Indian royals, but they have often played into the orientalist misconception.¹³⁰ Films such as Ivory/Merchant's *Hullabaloo in Pictures* and Shyam Benegal's musical *Zubeida*, both about the current Jodhpur royal family, have perpetuated the image of the zenana in the popular imagination. In many ways, the 'imagined communities' of princely women have survived more in the realm of fiction than history. Indeed, history has shut out the courtly Indian woman even as she appeared to be shut in by seclusion. This work aims to begin the project of addressing this lacuna. It argues that charting the transition of the zenana during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries serves as a vibrant kaleidoscope into observing systems of regional power, as *pardah* women subverted not only male hierarchies within their kingdoms but also resisted the panopticon-like surveillance of the external, European occupier, and later played a part in postcolonial politics in South Asia.

Schemata

This book is arranged into six chapters. Chapter 1 explores the complexities of zenana politics in the late colonial state, *c.* 1890–1947, by focusing on issues of male succession, women serving as regents, rivalry within a polygamous institution, and the colonial encounter with the sequestered female ruler. Questioning orientalist and patriarchal readings of the zenana, it argues that royal Indian women resisted both colonial and indigenous male hierarchies, by leveraging political, social and sometimes military power as well as legal intelligence in their favour. It elaborates upon the history of the princely states, the internal hierarchy of the zenana and colonial and indigenous accounts of the interactions between Zenana women and British officials.

Chapter 2 focuses on the role of women in disputed dynastic successions, by examining closely Kenneth Fitze's *A Review of Modern Practice in Regard to Successions in Indian States* from 1947. It investigates examples from Hindu Rajput, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh kingdoms, as well as eastern Kshatriya and Maratha states. These histories reveal how women, either as arbiters of disputes or as mothers of future heirs, controlled and affected dynastic successions within Indian

princely states. They often manipulated the intervention of British administrators and Anglo-Indian law to push for succession outcomes that favoured them, while simultaneously displacing indigenous male members of the courtly family.

Chapter 3 addresses the politics of marriage alliance for Zenana women in the late colonial state and during the twentieth century. Under the umbrella of the Pax Britannica, the motivations for royal alliances changed, and unions between ruling dynasties, which ordinarily did not intermarry, became more prevalent. Love marriages such as that of Indira Devi of Baroda began to appear; British colonial administrators and members of the English royal family including Queen Victoria became involved in affiancing Indian rulers, serving as intermediaries; and western women arrived in India as royal brides. In addition, this chapter discusses the ramifications of the revolutionizing 1956 Hindu Marriage Act, which prohibited polygamy, and engendered more 'deviant', less traditional, 'love' matches and its implications for dynastic marriage in nationalist, postcolonial India.

Chapter 4 turns to the disputed marriages of the Hindu Rajput princesses of Rajkot and Palitana in peninsular Gujarat, *c.* 1901 and 1908, respectively. It analyses the ways in which Ranis co-opted the language of western romance and companionate marriage and used Anglo-Indian law to break off unwanted marriage alliances for their daughters. In the process, they contested both British intervention into Zenana courtly affairs and curtailed the influence of local male scions. It is a vital lens into how Zenana women worked across different levels of the colonial bureaucracy, often pitting local officials against their superiors in Delhi or London.

Chapter 5 develops further issues of sovereignty, law and sexual politics through an examination of two rulers from the central Indian kingdom of Indore. Spanning the reigns of Tukoji Rao Holkar and his son Yeshwant Rao Holkar, from the 1920s to the 1940s, it examines how the personal choice of women, as mistresses and royal brides, affected the political status of Indian princes, in one instance leading to the ruler's abdication and in another compelling the Maharaja to rewrite succession law by instituting a female heir. It will argue that the 'wrong woman', as defined by traditional circles or the British, affected a ruler's ability to remain sovereign.

The sixth and concluding chapter investigates broadly the politics of Zenana women in postcolonial India. In particular, it analyses the lives of two former Maharanis who have subsequently become elected democratic politicians, Vijaya Raje Scindia and Gayatri Devi. This chapter addresses issues of the political family, female agency through widowhood and the development of the Rajvanshi, or princely politician, in post-Independence India. In certain cases, Zenana women had greater authority as members of elected government than previously, particularly when their elected constituencies were larger than the territory of their erstwhile states.

The Epilogue links the 'Zenana mentality' to contemporary twenty-first-century South Asian politics and highlights its currency and relevance to this day. In addition, it discusses the appropriateness of the construction of a 'colonial confusion' in critiquing how British officials perceived the roles and identities of courtly Indian men and women at the high noon of the Raj.

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