Maharajah of Bikaner: India (Makers of the Modern World)

by

Hugh Purcell

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Synopsis

The story of the Indian soldiery in the Great War needs a new telling and one important chapter of it will be about the Maharajah of Bikaner: Dashing, autocratic and a formidable public speaker, Ganga Singh commanded his own camel corps called the Ganga Risala, fought on the Western Front and in Egypt, became the first Indian general in the British Indian army and persuaded the maharajas to unite into the Chamber of Princes. As a result of this and his war record he was invited by Lloyd George to attend the Imperial War Conference in 1917 and then the Versailles Peace Conference two years later, where he persuaded the other delegates to include India in the new League of Nations, quite an achievement as it was not an independent nation. Less successfully he tried to prevent the dismemberment of Turkey.

Sort review

The Maharaja of Bikaner traces the political life of Maharaja Ganga Singh who ruled the Rajput desert state of Bikaner in northwestern India from 1898 to 1942. During his lifetime Indian nationalist organizations and leaders mobilized Indian masses to demand first responsible and then self-government as British power at home and abroad languished. With an impressive physique, an easy command of English and shrewd political instincts, Maharaja Ganga Singh quickly achieved prominence in international and domestic political spheres. Hugh Purcell ably chronicles Ganga Singh's contribution to what the British initially had demanded of their princely clients -- military support. Serving first with British forces during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 in China and briefly on the French front during World War I, his personal and material assistance was acknowledged with invitations to London for the Imperial War Conference in 1917 and the Imperial War Cabinet and Conference in 1918, and to Paris for Peace Conference in 1919. An earlier monograph pointed out the seminal nature of Bikaner's role at these Conferences, which for the first time revealed British acceptance and acknowledgement of the fact that the princes could be representatives of the princely states and of India in international politics.(1) Purcell significantly extends this scholarship with his analysis of the key debates and detailed documentation of Bikaner's activities in London and Paris. One contentious issue at the Peace Conference was whether India should have the same representation as the so-called White Dominions such as Canada and Australia in the League of Nations. India clearly was not a self-governing State, Dominion, or Colony, the criteria for membership in the League. Purcell details the efforts of Maharaja Ganga Singh, S. P. Sinha (the first Indian appointed to the Executive Council of the Governor-General of India in 1909, President of the Indian National Congress in 1915, and, as Lord Sinha of Raipur briefly the Under Secretary of State for India in 1919), and Edwin Montagu, then Secretary of State for India, at the Peace Conference to ensure India's admission to the League of Nations. Since a resolution of 25 January 1919 stated that the League would be open to every civilized nation, Bikaner (princes were frequently referred to with
the name of their state) argued that "I would venture to urge with all the emphasis at my command that if the people of India with their ancient civilization were considered fit to fight in Europe and in other theatres of the war side by side with the other nations of this world in this tragic drama, then on the grounds of civilisation and the still higher grounds of our common humanity there can be no just or cogent excuse to deny India her admission into the League."(92) He concluded that "Where it is a question of securing the peace of the world, the important fact must be borne in mind that India represents one fifth of the entire human race."(92-93) Subsequently Bikaner lobbied successfully with Lord Robert Cecil and President Woodrow Wilson who then supported a seat for India in the League of Nations. Purcell's analysis is based on research in Bikaner archives and in London in the papers of S. P. Sinha and Edwin Montagu and the minutes of the British Empire delegation and the Covenant Committee of the Peace Conference. Chapters on Maharaja Ganga Singh as a leader of Indian princes who sought greater autonomy vis-a-vis the Government of India frame those on his work abroad. Ganga Singh was the first Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes, inaugurated in 1921 as an advisory body to the Viceroy, the leader of the princely delegation at the Round Table Conferences in the early 1930s in London, and an increasingly reluctant participant during negotiations over the proposed federation of British Indian provinces and the princely states. These activities and the personality of Bikaner are briefly sketched. A definite plus are the photographs of the Maharaja at various stages of his life as well as the analysis of the painting, Peace Conference at the Quai d'Orsay by Sir William Orpen at the Imperial War Museum. An equally reproduced painting that includes Maharaja Ganga Singh is Some Statesmen of the Great War by Sir James Guthrie at the National Portrait Gallery. In the former, Bikaner is standing centered behind David Lloyd George but in the latter he is in the shadow at the end of the assembled men. One wonders at the reasons for this difference between the two paintings. The narrative of Indian politics is on less firm ground than that of diplomatic negotiations. Some less germane facts are incorrect such as the statement that Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty was from Persia. He was a Chaghatai Turk from Central Asia. More troubling are assertions such as that the seeds of Pakistan could be traced back to when Muhammad Ali Jinnah "had taken the [Muslim] League out of the INC [Indian National Congress] in 1920." (129) The Muslim League was never part of the Congress. In 1920 Jinnah personally left the Congress and became more active in Muslim League. Here is evidence of limited reading in the extensive historiography of early twentieth century India. Occasionally Purcell includes local gossip in his narrative. One such story asserts that after Lord Chelmsford, then the Viceroy and Governor-General, had asked Bikaner "what he would like for his services during and after the war, he [Bikaner] had replied 'Mesopotamia.'" (106) Ian Copland and I have cited a letter of 1 March 1917 from Chelmsford to Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India in London, in which Chelmsford said that Bikaner had written to the Viceroy to ask for land grants in India or captured territory abroad such as German East Africa as rewards for war contributions by the Indian princes. 2 Here and elsewhere an opportunity is missed to compare such a story
apparently still told in Bikaner with available written records that relate the same incident differently and then to speculate on what this local knowledge indicates about the continuing stature of Maharaja Ganga Singh within his state. Such stories also indicate the difficulty of recreating the past. This volume will be most useful for readers interested in the princely states and one of the most prominent Indian rulers of the twentieth century, Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, and for diplomatic historians who want to learn more about the anomaly of how a British colony, India, became an autonomous member of the League of Nations. A particularly useful feature in this book and series is the chronology of Bikaner's life in relation to broader historical and cultural events. 1 Barbara N. Ramusack, The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: Dissolution of a Patron-Client Purcell significantly extends this scholarship System, 1914-1939 (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1978), chapter 2 and 72. -- Barbara N Ramusack H- Diplo Review 20110603 --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition.About the AuthorHugh Purcell worked for many years producing history programmes for BBC Radio and Television. Prominent among them were 'The Roads to War', the obituary of Oswald Mosley and the BAFTA-winning 'American Civil War'. His previous books include Lloyd George, The Spanish Civil War, Revolutionary War and a biography of Tom Wintringham, The Last English Revolutionary. He is Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and an FRSA. --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition.
On 15 November 1918, Ganga Singh, the 21st Maharaja of Bikaner, was at his palace in Rajasthan when he received a telegram from the Viceroy, King George V's representative and therefore the most senior British person in India. It said: 'As a result of communications between myself and London I am now in a position to ask Your Highness to proceed to England at once. It is absolutely essential that Your Highness should secure accommodation on the Chindwara, sailing on 23 instant from Bombay. Your Highness will be gratified to learn that the Prime Minister himself expressed a wish that you should go to London now. Precise method in which Your Highness' services will be asked has not yet been defined but I know Your Highness will understand the impossibility of getting matters clearly cut at the present juncture in the present stress.'

This was the Maharaja's invitation to represent India at discussions in the Imperial War Cabinet and elsewhere about the peace settlement consequent upon the armistice with Germany, signed only a week before on 11 November. The status of an Indian delegation at the Peace Conference itself, due to begin at Paris in January, had not been decided. Indeed, it had not been decided whether India would be represented independently at all. This also applied to the Dominions of the British Empire, the name given to the member countries that governed themselves like Canada, Australia and South Africa. What had been decided was that India should be afforded the same status as a Dominion, although it was not a self-governing country. The fact that over one million Indian soldiers had fought for the British was considered reason enough to justify representation, if any were needed.

The fierce argument over representation called into question the very status of the Dominions. Were they nations or not? As the Prime Minister of Canada, Sir Robert Borden, wrote home to his wife: 'Canada is a nation that is not a nation and it is about time we altered it.' What was their status vis-à-vis each other? Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the British War Cabinet and then to the Peace Conference, said 'the Dominions are as jealous of each other as cats'. The row rumbled across the continents to national parliaments well into December. At first the British government
assumed the Prime Ministers of the Dominions would 'tag along to the Peace Conference as part of the British delegation'. This went down badly. Sir Robert Borden threatened to 'pack [his] trunks, return to Canada, summon Parliament, and put the whole thing before them' unless Canada was given full representation. In the end the Prime Minister David Lloyd George gave way, and so did his two co-leaders in the Supreme War Council, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau of France and President Woodrow Wilson of the United States. On 15 January 1919, 'the British Dominions and India' were classed as 'belligerent powers with special interests'. As such, their representatives were invited to take part in sessions of the Conference that specifically concerned them. Like the larger Dominions, India was allowed two representatives, and here another contentious issue arose. Lloyd George had already invited the Maharaja of Bikaner to represent the 600 Indian Princes. They formed a considerable power bloc because their states together covered about one-third of the land of India and one-fifth of the population. They were supposedly autonomous, and proud of the fact that they had sworn allegiance to the British Crown but not to the British government; a distinction of royal status. The remainder of the vast region – today divided into India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka – was British India in 1919, governed by a Secretary of State in London and a Viceroy in Delhi. The Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, had asked Sir SP Sinha to represent British India, and in some ways he was an obvious choice. He was a Bengali lawyer with considerable political experience who already served on the Viceroy's Executive Council, the first Indian to do so. He, like Bikaner, had sat in the Imperial War Cabinet. Moreover, and this was what made his selection so obvious, Lloyd George was about to appoint him Under Secretary of State for India in his new Cabinet with a seat in the House of Lords. Thus, on 10 January 1919, Sir SP Sinha became the Lord Sinha of Raipur, the first Indian to be given a British peerage. However, that left out of the delegation to Paris the Secretary of State for India, the Rt. Hon. Edwin Montagu, an ambitious politician who, unusually in that post, was dedicated to India. He was not pleased. He wrote to Lord Chelmsford: 'An attempt is made to invite only your nominees, but I claim they cannot represent you without me.' He complained to Lloyd George, who gave in again. That meant three representatives in a delegation of two. What was to be done? Another form of words was required and the contemporary British history of the Peace Conference found one: 'India was represented by her Parliamentary spokesmen, the Secretary of State and Lord Sinha, with the co-operation of the Maharaja of Bikaner.' The three Indian delegates at the Paris Conference all shared the vision of an India governing itself, but under the might of the British Empire. The key word over which much constitutional hot air was expended was 'paramountcy', meaning pre-eminency or supremacy, yet there was obviously a paradox here, even a contradiction. As Sinha said, he believed India should achieve autonomy within the British Empire through 'gradual evolution and cautious progress', but he could not think of a time when Britain would not be the paramount power in India. 'We have gone – shall I say lightly? – into a series of decisions which put India so far as international affairs are concerned on a basis wholly inconsistent with the position of a subordinate country.' EDWIN MONTAGU, 1919 Sinha, Bikaner
and Montagu all believed the very presence of an Indian delegation at the Peace Conference with the same status as the Dominions was a huge step forward. Edwin Montagu wrote to Lord Chelmsford again: ‘I wonder whether you ever have time to reflect upon the profound, irretraceable [sic] changes that have been made in the Constitution of the British Empire in the last few months? We have gone – shall I say lightly? – into a series of decisions which put India so far as international affairs are concerned on a basis wholly inconsistent with the position of a subordinate country.’

Lord Chelmsford did not share Montagu’s excitement. He replied lugubriously: ‘You set out the extraordinary development in India’s constitutional position. I entirely agree with you, but I do not think it would be wise for you or me to count on gratitude or respect. Someone said to me the other day “India is grateful not for the past but for favours to come” and as I look back over the last three years and see the number of remedies I have made to supposed injustices, I despair, because these things are in no sense counted as righteousness but are forgotten and put aside.’

What were these ‘reforms’ Montagu referred to? By a coincidence of timing, during the same few months Montagu and Sinha were at the Paris Peace Conference increasing the standing of India in an international forum, they were also steering through the British Parliament the Government of India Bill that would set up provincial legislatures in India empowering Indians to have more control over their own local affairs, an early step towards self-rule. This was why Lord Sinha had been appointed.

The first few months of 1919 were momentous times in the history of Indian independence. What happened in Paris and London was only part of the story. Far away from the chandeliers and champagne of these two capitals, in the stifling heat and poverty of a north Indian town, a tragedy took place that provoked the human rights lawyer and political activist Mohandas Gandhi to begin his demand for swaraj, or complete self-government for India. This was the Amritsar Massacre of April 1919. In an enclosed public area the size of Trafalgar Square, troops of the British Indian Army fired on a peaceful rally protesting against British rule. They killed or wounded nearly 2,000 civilians in a matter of minutes. In India this atrocity overwhelmed any goodwill the British government was earning with its Government of India Bill and by its advocacy of constitutional autonomy for India in Paris. It pushed to one side the pro-British reformers led by Montagu, Sinha and Bikaner, and gave centre stage to Gandhi, a saint-like revolutionary who soon became known throughout India as the mahatma or ‘great soul’, the Father of the Nation. His vision was for pura swaraj (Hindi for ‘complete independence’) and now, outraged by the massacre in Amritsar, he set out on his path of satyagraha (‘passive resistance’) in order to achieve it. ‘He is a figure out of the Arabian Nights with jewel-studded turban, an exceedingly handsome countenance and upright bearing.’

FRANCES STEVENSON ON THE MAHARAJA OF BIKANER

The full significance of Amritsar did not register in Paris at the time. The British Empire delegation had a more pressing question to answer. Come the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June, who should sign first on behalf of India – Bikaner, the princely soldier, or Sinha, the Bengali politician? The King-Emperor, as George V was titled, was consulted over the telephone. According to Montagu, he ‘expressed himself emphatically of the opinion that Bikaner’s name should come first’. This is
not surprising, for King George and the Maharaja of Bikaner were friends. In fact Bikaner had
been a most loyal ADC (honorary aide de camp or assistant) to King George since their first
meeting in 1902 when the Maharaja had visited London for the coronation of Edward VII; then, of
course, the future King George V was still Prince of Wales. On subsequent meetings, they
indulged each other with shooting parties and gossip rather than talk of politics. King George
then astonished Montagu by saying 'he was surprised to learn that Bikaner was not a British
subject!' This speaks well for Bikaner's loyalty to King George and his English accent – he
prided himself in his knowledge of Edwardian slang – but less well for the King-Emperor's
powers of observation.

In the end, Montagu and Bikaner signed the Treaty of Versailles and Sinha did not. A modest, self-effacing man who referred to himself as 'just a foot soldier of
reform', Sinha probably eschewed the limelight. The same could not be said of the Maharaja,
an extrovert who enjoyed the many trappings of his rank. Lloyd George referred to him as a
'magnificent specimen of manhood' and Lloyd George's secretary and mistress Frances
Stevenson was even more adulatory: 'He is a figure out of the Arabian Nights with jewel-studded
turban, an exceedingly handsome countenance and upright bearing.' One wonders if that is
why the artist Sir William Orpen, when painting his iconic picture The Signing of the Peace now
hanging in the Imperial War Museum, London, stood him and Sir Edwin Montagu directly behind
Lloyd George. There is the majestic Maharaja, placed centre-stage between two pillars with the
light shining on him from the mirror behind. Yet probably the first reaction of many who gaze at
this picture is to wonder what this exotic character, so conspicuous among the elderly Western
statesmen, was doing at the Paris Peace Conference.I

The Life and the Land

The Maharaja of Bikaner and the Indian Princes

Ganga Singh, Maharaja of Bikaner, was born on 13 October
1880. When he was only seven he became the 21st ruler of the desert kingdom. The founder of
the line, Rao Bika, belonged to the warrior clan of Rathores, whose patriotism and valour were
already celebrated in Indian history. In 1465 he had marched north from Jodhpur with 600
soldiers, through a semi-arid, de-populated wasteland, and stopped at a village called Deshnok.
Here lived a woman, Sri Karniji, who was worshipped as semi-divine. She announced to Rao
Bika that 'your destiny is higher than your father's and many servants will touch your feet'. So
he built a fort, 'Bika's fort' and that became the town of Bikaner. By 1949, when all the kingdoms
of the Rajput princes (for the Rathores were a branch of Rajputs who claimed to be the original
Hindu warrior dynasty) were merged into the Union of Rajasthan, the state of Bikaner covered
23,000 square miles and was the sixth largest Indian princedom. Until Ganga Singh built the
famous Gang Canal in the 1920s, which transformed the state, it was a princedom with few
attractions. On the edge of the forbidding Thar Desert, only sand dunes met the eye for vast
stretches, the scorching sun making human and animal life a daily struggle against nature. The
annual rainfall is only 11 inches. Until the reign of Ganga Singh's predecessor, Maharaja Dungar
Singh (1872–87), no roads, schools or hospitals existed; the administration of the state was
minimal save for keeping a large and untrained army that was employed to subdue rebel
thakurs, the Rajput chiefs. Famines were frequent, decimating a population that on Ganga
Singh's accession numbered just under one million. Yet Bikaner had strategic importance. The caravan routes across the Thar Desert, carrying trade to and from the west coast, converged first on Rajgarh and then on the town of Bikaner itself, which is only 400 miles or so south-west of Delhi. Today, the Pakistan border bisects the Thar Desert, but in the days of Ganga Singh it was the border with another state of British India called Sind. To the north lay the warlike land of the Punjab through which enemies of India could march on Delhi. Impregnable forts guarded this border. Within the principality of Bikaner, the Rathore princes were frequently troubled by rebellious thakurs. So on the one hand, the great Mughals and subsequently the British needed alliances with the Rathores to protect Delhi. On the other hand, the Rathores needed alliances with the powers in Delhi to protect their kingdom. Ganga Singh followed family tradition by basing his reputation on royal alliances.

The Mughal dynasty dominated north India from Babur's victory near Delhi in 1526 to Aurangzeb's death in 1707. During this entire period all sixteen rulers of Bikaner, either at the head of their own troops or in command of an imperial army, fought for the Mughals, extending their power throughout the subcontinent, except the south. As a result, they were awarded vice-royalties, governorships and the hereditary title of Maharaja (maha-raja means literally 'great ruler'). The Bikaner dynasty grew with the Mughal dynasty and soon eclipsed the other Rajput states, and when the Mughal Empire disintegrated the state of Bikaner was also reduced to anarchy, though it was never conquered by another powerful dynasty rising to the south, the Marathas.

**The Mughal Dynasty**

The first Mughal ruler to come from Persia and conquer north India was Babur, who entered Delhi in 1526. His five descendants, ending with Aurangzeb who died in 1707, were larger than life, brilliant and vital rulers who claimed the blood of Genghis Khan and Timur flowed in their veins. Their monuments, like the tomb of the Taj Mahal in Agra and the private audience chamber, the Diwan-e-Khaas, in the Red Fort of Delhi with its inscription 'If there is paradise on earth it is here, it is here, it is here', are among the most beautiful in the world. The last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Zafar II, was expelled by the British from Delhi in 1858 for his part in the great uprising. Then the British arrived. Reversing the axiom that trade follows the flag, the East India Company Army followed its merchants. In 1818 its Governor-General, the Marquess of Hastings, promised a treaty of 'perpetual friendship, alliance and unity of interests' to Maharaja Surat Singh of Bikaner. This alliance became what Ganga Singh was later to call 'the Magna Carta of the Bikaner State', so its wording needs to be looked at with care. It declared that the friends and enemies of one party were the friends and enemies of both. It established 'an absolute unity of interests'. In the short term, the East India Company Army easily defeated the thakurs and established security. In the longer term, the British Political Agent at the princely court made sure 'unity of interest' really meant the supremacy of British interest, and so it was throughout all the Indian princedoms that had similar treaties.

In fact this was one of the causes of the Indian Mutiny, now called 'the First War of Independence' in India. In 1848 Governor-General Dalhousie passed the notorious 'law of lapse' which empowered the East India Company to take over a princedom if it found the heir to the throne unworthy to rule. Several leaders of the rebel army,
including the heroic Rani of Jhansi, were heirs apparent who found their princedoms confiscated. The Mutiny broke out in 1857 and the so-called ‘Devil’s Wind’ consumed the arid plains of north India with terrible fury – on both sides.

THE INDIAN MUTINY (1857–8) At the time this great uprising against the East India Company that ruled India on behalf of the British government was known as ‘the Devil’s Wind’, because it consumed all in its path across the scorched plains of North India in an orgy of violence – by both sides. It was more than a ‘mutiny’, as the British call it, because it extended to the civil population. But it was less than a ‘War of Indian Independence’, as Indians call it, because it had no political aim except driving out the British, and it only affected the north of the country.

By no means all the Indian rulers joined the insurrection. Ganga Singh’s role model was the 19th Maharaja of Bikaner, Sardar Singh, who stood firm with the British. It looked for a while as though the rebels, having captured Delhi, would march on the British capital of Calcutta. Those with a fearful disposition predicted the rebels in Delhi would be joined by the fierce tribesmen of the Punjab, only recently conquered by the East India Company Army in two costly wars. While other princes wavered, waiting to see which way the wind would blow, Sardar Singh instantly threw his lot in with the British. He personally marched his army to its northern border with the Punjab and occupied the town of Hassar, a strategic stronghold on the old road to Delhi. Under his command in the field, his well-drilled cavalry supported by a camel corps defeated the rebels in several battles. Without his timely action the revolt might well have spread to the Punjab and radically strengthened the rebel armies. Afterwards, the British were fulsome in their praise of Sardar Singh. The official dispatch put it in capitals: ‘NO PRINCE IN RAJPUTANA SAVE BIKANER TOOK THE FIELD IN PERSON IN OUR FAVOUR WITHOUT HESITATION; BY HIS COURAGE AND EXAMPLE OF HIS LOYALTY HE CHECKED DISAFFECTION AND GAVE CONFIDENCE TO THE WAVERING.’

Queen Victoria herself, soon to assume the mantle of Empress of India, sent a kharita (a formal letter exchanged between rulers) which was presented at a durbar (a ceremonial gathering of princes): ‘It is in such times that the true quality of friendship is tested. Her Majesty is deeply sensible of the loyalty and devotion displayed by Y our Highness … ‘

The 19th Maharaja was a real prince in the genuine Indian tradition and the 21st Maharaja followed his example. Ninety-nine elephants filled Sardar Singh’s stables and his military establishment was well beyond his means and needs in both size and grandeur. General Hervey visited him in about 1860 and described a scene that could have been reproduced as a British picture of the ‘magnificent Orient’: ‘We reached the fort just as the Maharajah had emerged through its gateway, seated grandly in a state peenus or sedan chair, born by men in scarlet livery. This fine conveyance was emblazoned with designs of gold, and set around with deep gold fringes, a rich silk canopy covering it, reared at the corners upon shafts of gold. He was greeted by a salute from two cannons made of burnished brass, worked by his golundaz, or artillerymen. I observed that a large loaded pistol was placed by his side. His attire was the usual Rajpootanah long robe, the skirts thereof in the amplest of pleatings; a finely hilted dagger in his waistband, a handsomely sheathed sword held in his right hand, some diamond rings on his fingers, rich gold
bracelets on his wrists, and a deep necklace of large pearls with a fine single emerald suspended at its centre, his tall head-gear being decorated with the diamond aigrette in the shape of the figure 6, peculiar to Rajpoot princes; and a superb diamond frontlet of a single stone, pendant over his forehead from the front part of his head-dress.'6 If Lloyd George's secretary thought the 21st Maharaja of Bikaner was out of the Arabian Nights, then the pomp and display of the 19th would have attracted attention at the court of Queen Victoria herself. After the Mutiny had been quelled in 1858, the British government pushed aside the East India Company and ruled India directly. Its vision became increasingly imperialistic at the expense of the autonomy of the princely states, but the British Empire won the loyalty of the princes by decreeing they owed allegiance not to the British Parliament but to the British Crown. Queen Victoria became Empress of India and the Indian princes bowed the knee to her or to her representative in India, the Viceroy. In their own kingdoms the princes were supposedly sovereign. The illusion was maintained by grand durbars with their Emperor or his Viceroy, and by the showering of titles and honours. In reality this was a semi-fiction. A good example of this was the accession to the throne of Bikaner by the young Ganga Singh. In 1887 Maharaja Dungar Singh lay dying, without a son and heir. He sent a kharita to the Viceroy Lord Dufferin through the Political Agent in Bikaner, A P Thornton: 'I have according to my intention, adopted my brother, Ganga Singh, who will succeed me. I request that the Government of India may confirm the succession of my brother after my demise.'7 The Viceroy confirmed the kharita and on 21 August Ganga Singh was proclaimed the 21st Maharaja. Until he was 18, in 1898, a Council of Regency controlled the state of Bikaner. Its President was Sir Charles Bayley, the new Political Agent, for it was set up by the British government. Such was the extent of British control over supposedly sovereign princes in India. By the time Maharaja Ganga Singh assumed power in 1898, the once-sovereign princes in alliance with the Crown had become 'chiefs under the suzerainty' of Britain. This quaint pseudo-feudal language was used by the Government of India to denote the new status. Other words from the same language crept into documents, like 'wardship' and 'allegiance'. When the Political Agent in Bikaner wrote to Ganga Singh in 1898 to confirm his assumption of power, the language may have been supercilious but it was certainly not archaic:'My dear Maharaja,I am directed to inform you that the Government of India have decided that Your Highness may now be entrusted with the management of your state, subject to certain limitations to be imposed for a time. These limitations are: (1) That no measures or acts taken or done by the Council of Regency during the minority may be altered or revised without the concurrence of the Political Resident. (2) That the Political Resident's approval must be obtained before any important change is introduced. (3) That His Highness the Maharaja will not act against the Political Resident's advice in any important matter. I am to ask you to send me a formal acceptance in writing of these limitations. Yours sincerelyH A Vincent'8 Worse was to come when Lord Curzon became Viceroy the following year. His period in office was dubbed 'the climax of Empire', resonating with Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' music, and dazzling with the Parade of Princes at the Delhi durbar in honour of King Edward VII in 1903 when bejewelled
maharajas on magnificently-caparisoned elephants paid homage. He declared the princes were no longer 'the architectural adornments of the imperial edifice but the pillars that help to sustain the main roof'. At about the same time he also declared that 'the sovereignty of the Crown is everywhere unchallenged; it has itself laid down the limitations of its own prerogative'. This meant it could override any existing treaties or rights. In other words, the princes were not sovereign, and to make that humiliatingly clear the Government of India instituted a scheme of prohibitions. Maharajas were not to call their sons princes; they were not supposed to 'reign' but only to 'rule'; their troops were not 'armies' but only 'forces'. The 's' word as in 'sovereign' was to be avoided unless it applied to the British Crown.Curzon said he wanted the princes to be 'not relics but rulers, not puppets but living factors in the administration'. What he meant was he conceded them power provided they accepted the 'paramountcy' of the Crown. In his interpretation of that archaic word, this justified his interference, even in the detail, of how they ran their states. From his early years as Maharaja, Ganga Singh objected to this. He accepted 'paramountcy' but questioned where the line should be drawn over his own autocracy. In fact his future reputation as a progressive politician seeking Indian autonomy may be traced back to the arguments he had with the Political Agent in Bikaner over his own autonomy.

The Regency sent young Ganga Singh to Mayo College in Ajmer when he was nine. This was the Eton of India, a Princes' College with a European staff who believed dogmatically what was good for Europeans was good for Indians. Its task was to educate young princes to rule, to inculcate loyalty to the British government and to persuade in the superiority of all things European. In the view of one teacher, this meant all things English – 'the speaking of faultless English, the playing of good cricket and the possession of good table manners'. By all accounts it succeeded with Ganga Singh. He always won first prize for English. Gifted with a resonant voice, he loved oratory, both extemporaneous debate and recitation. His elocution was perfect. In later years, when he was regarded a leading speaker at international meetings in Europe, he had much to thank Mayo for. Although not an intellectual, he had a quick grasp of knowledge and a diligent approach to study. He left in 1895 when he was fourteen. Then the Regency chose a personal tutor at Bikaner for him to develop his military skills, such as riding and shooting, and his understanding of government – British of course. Mr Brian Egerton soon won over his ward by his wholehearted dedication to the task in hand. The Maharaja remembered in an anecdote that says much about living conditions in this poor desert kingdom: Sir Brian [as he later became] came here in the pleasant month of July [this was a joke of course as the temperature would be in the mid 40s] before the rains had broken. We were then living in the Fort, in that part of the old palace which had only recently been partly completed – minus electric light, minus electric fans, minus khas tattis [air coolers] and minus water pipes; in short minus all modern conveniences. Colonel Tomffrench-Mullen [sic], who was our doctor here, attempted to insist that he should not stay in the Fort as it was not fit for a European. His response was that his place was with his ward and he had to share his discomfort. And Sir Brian remembered: 'While His Highness was assiduous at his studies, his activity was amazing. Riding and shooting before breakfast and study morning...
and afternoon, polo in the evening, and at a later date roller skating to finish up with, was an ordinary day’s routine varied on holidays by a ride out eighteen miles to Gajner, shooting and pig-sticking there, and riding back in time for polo in the afternoon.¹³ Photographs of the Maharaja at the time of his assumption of power in 1898 show a tall, slim young man with a self-consciously erect bearing. What catches the eye is his face: the pale skin, already slightly fleshy, adorned with a luxurious moustache curling up at the ends and above that always a sumptuous turban. He was something of a dandy. His recent biographer, Professor L S Rathore, claims in his private life he was ‘a simple and unaffected gentleman’ but his daily dressing routine gives a different impression: ‘Every day, after a bath, for at least ten minutes, he set his moustache with a very fine elastic netting. One of his courtiers recorded: “After he had put on his clothes he would go to the room where his shoes were all in a row, and he would pick up a long pointer like you have in school. He would just touch one of the shoes with it, and that pair would be polished and brushed. Then in the lobby, there was his collection of walking sticks, and he would pick out one. Then a tray containing cigarette cases, one of which he would select. So he was very particular.”¹⁴ The book by Hugh Purcell has a rating of 5 out of 5.0. 1 people have provided feedback.