Thinking through livelihood: How a peasantry of princely Rājputāna became educated and activist rural citizens of Rajasthan, India

R. Thomas Rosin, Professor Emeritus R. Thomas Rosin describes the complex system of rainfall harvesting, aquifer recharge, and lift irrigation used on lands bordering the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India. He explores how this demanding system was key to the growth of formal education among the peasantry here during the pre-Independence period. As activism swept the countryside, a few would rise through formal education to positions in the royal administration to craft the very laws that would guide post-independence land reform in western India.

Rosin has spent many years over multiple visits to a complex 24-caste village community, stretching from 1964, just fifteen years after Indian Independence, until 2004. He conducted comparative research across the boundaries of the previous kingdoms known collectively as Rājputāna discovering significant differences in livelihood. Their large joint households, uniting several generations into families, practiced in the countryside. He describes the complex system of rainfall harvesting, aquifer recharge, and lift irrigation used on lands bordering the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India. He explores how this demanding system was key to the growth of formal education among the peasantry here during the pre-Independence period. As activism swept the countryside, a few would rise through formal education to positions in the royal administration to craft the very laws that would guide post-independence land reform in western India.

In this collection of writings on education in South Asia, Rosin's chapter alone deals with informal education through on-the-job training and apprenticeships, as traditionally practiced in the countryside. He documents skills in monitoring, measuring, and computing among sharecropping farmers previously non-literate but numerative. Their inventive ways to actively thinking out problems stands in contrast to much of the rote memorisation then trained in village schools at the time of his studies.

With educated descendants of peasants gaining positions of power, in a climate of rural and urban up-risings, the Maharaja and royal administration acted to reform the system.

Grand livestock fairs brought buyers from British India to purchase their bullock and camels, so prized as draft animals, while bringing together farmers and shepherds to both trade and socialise from distant villages. They shared aspirations and news, making them well aware of the nationalist movement under Gandhi and Congress Party in British India.

LAND REFORM FROM RAJPUTANA TO RAJASTHAN

This village was in the Marwār region of the Jodhpur Kingdom in the area of Rajputana (what would later become Rajasthan), which was ruled under a feudal system separate from, yet protected by, the British Raj, although the nearby town of Amer was under direct colonial rule.
The first was Mool Chand Sihag, a social reformer who laid much of the groundwork for the education of Jat tenants. He inspired the Jat youth with a thirst for education, and set up a chain of student hostels that allowed them to come to the towns to study in solidarity with fellow Jats. The second, and one of those he so inspired and educated, was Kan Singh Parhar who trained as a lawyer and would later write the Marwar Land Reform laws.

The third was Buldev Ram Minhas, who entered the Maharaja’s service as a postman, and eventually rose to become the police Deputy Inspector General. He was a strict law and order man, but had much sympathy for the suffering of the common people. He also helped educate Sihag’s students and bring them into the royal administration, and his power and influence helped dampen-down violence between authorities and reforming elements during these turbulent times.

WHAT DID THE ACTIVIST ACHIEVE?

The non-violent, but coercive civil disobedience of satyagrahā, empowered the peasants to challenge the free labour, exorbitant rents, and cesses on their ceremonies. With educated descendants of peasants gaining positions of power, in a climate of rural and urban up-risings, the Maharaja and royal administration acted to reform the system of land ownership throughout his realm.

The inspiration and effectiveness of satyagrahā in British India to force the British Lord as prime minister of his realm by the non-violent, but coercive civil resistance (such as C. S. Venkatachar), we can show in the maharajas of Rajputana replaced British lords as prime ministers of their realm petitioning their maharaja, Mayank Kumar on hydrology, Sobhag Mathur on civil resistance – I am detailing the links that brought Mahatma Gandhi through his “experiments in truth” was empirically exploring how to enshrine and dignify his fellows as citizens, whether wheat growers, or cotton growers, to create and sustain the institutions that would move ever closer to the rule of law, justice, and human rights.

Up-risings and demonstrations in both the rural and urban sectors of his kingdom convinced him to aspire as a constitutional monarch to bring his realm into the 20th century.

While the Maharaja ruled, seventy percent of the land of his realm were held by various ruling classes of princes, lords, land-entitled priests, warriors, and moneylenders. Their share-cropping tenants paid ever increasing rents, free labour, and cesses to gain permission to perform their commemoral religious, cultural and life-cycle rites and practices.

HOW SOCIAL UPLIFT BECAME A MOVEMENT FOR REFORM

Meanwhile in the kingdom’s capital Jai Narayan Vyas since 1920s joined others forming civil societies, each eventually banned, with leaders exiled or imprisoned. They set the urban scene for change. During the early 1940s Mool Chand Sihag’s Jat Farmer’s Reform Society of Marwar became an inspiration to the first civil organisations not suppressed by the Jodhpur royal administration. Appearing at their anniversary conference gathering activist farmers, the Maharaja listened. The Maharaja goes further, perhaps influenced by the Jats within his administration and the non-violent resistance of these widespread, assemblies of peasants. His royal administration drafts the initial laws to sweep away the feudal land ownership titles and governance opposing the countryside.

WHAT PERSUaded THE MAHARAJAS TO MAKE REFORMS EXEMPLARY FOR THE FUTURE DEMOCRATIC PROVINCE OF RAJASTHAN

The ruler of Jodhpur mid-1940s was H.H. Maharaja Umrao Singh. The changes that came about during his reign were not suppressed. Jats, well-educated descendants of share-croppers, into his administration.

References
