How a peasantry of princely Rājputāna became educated and activist rural citizens of Rajasthan, India

Professor Emeritus R. Thomas Rosin, Professor Emeritus, explores how folk knowledge and partnerships among tenant farmers in the desert region of Rajasthan, India supported peasant activism and rebellion in the decades around Indian Independence. Demanding livelihoods involving computation and ethnohydrology prepared them for formal education. Gandhi’s Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) campaigns in British India inspired them as citizens to overturn their domination as feudal subjects in the princely kingdoms of western India through radical land reform.

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 Rajputana discovering significant differences in livelihood. Their large joint households, their partnerships shared among families irrigating, and their egalitarian, supportive relations with in-laws in neighbouring villages, proved distinctive to the Manaur and Sherkhwati regions. The solidarity and mutual trust enforced in their livelihoods lead to unity in political activism, shifting from social reform of their own traditions to open rebellion.

While referring to his own research and published accounts, he taps as well the historic lore of the Jat community, previously so central among activist tenants, as presented in their contemporary websites enriching the tale: Jatland.com, 2017. 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 share-cropping 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.

**HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS**

In this large and complex multi-caste village community in the Aravalli Hills, Rosin observed livelihoods raising livestock and double crop farming, supporting as well many craftsmen and shepherds who raised but a single rainfall crop. Check dams collected rain run-off from the surrounding hills in numerous impoundments, such as reservoirs, ponds, and silt ponds. By excavating and carting silt and manures to improve their irrigated fields, they kept the beds of reservoirs and ponds porous to soak and recharge groundwater. Across generations, they have reshaped the landscape to capture rain run off to recharge the aquifers they tapped through shaft wells.

Educated through apprenticeships working at these wells, four sharecropping families joined in partnerships. Sustaining trust in sharing equal inputs of labour and outputs of grain required careful monitoring of quantities and computing shares, encouraging a mathematics on a base 4. Pebble monitors tracked each lift of water from the wells, orchestrating shifts in the work force. Matching the amount seeded with the anticipated reserves of groundwater to bring a crop to maturity depended upon remembering and learning from estimates made in prior seasons. Similarly, where to deepen a well or dig a new one was a probing about groundwater flows and pondering their relationship to surface collection of rain run-off. Rosin argues their skills in management to plan, irrigate, or expand their crop land. He gives an example of their mental arithmetic skills when recounting a visit to a goldsmith to buy gold through a tricky calculation of cost in one’s head. Such families though previously not literate proved numerous, collaborative, and empirically sensitive preparing their descendants for success in formal education.

Local farmers requested Rosin to study and put into writing their understandings about the hydrology of groundwater flows. Such publications and maps supported a village-wide petition to improve a levee and flow gate collecting rain water, which requires understanding how surface water influences groundwater supplies. Together, they changed the direction of a proposed government water schemes, and contributed to policies joining what had been the work of two separate government ministries.

Grand livestock fairs brought buyers from British India to purchase their bullocks 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.

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Meanwhile in the kingdom's capital, Jodhpur, resistance increased. The non-violent, but coercive civil disobedience of satyagraha empowered the peasantry 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 uprisings, the Maharaja and royal administration acted to reform the system of land ownership throughout his realm. The inspiration and effectiveness of satyagraha in British India to force inquiry, fact finding, and negotiation led to the Maharaja replacing his British Lord as prime minister of his realm by the brilliant Indian Civil Service officer C. S. Venkatachattar. Up-risings and demonstrations in both the rural and urban sectors of his kingdom convinced him to aspire to a constitutional monarchy 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 ceremonial religious, cultural, and life-cycle rites and practices.

HOW SOCIAL UP-LIFT BECAME A MOVEMENT FOR REFORM

In so uniting Anthropology with History through long-term research, what are your plans for future work?

By joining the archival works of Ramachandra Guha on Gandhian satyagraha campaigns in British India with studies focused on Marwar – such as Hira Singh on hydrology, Sobhag Mathur on civil resistance – I am detailing the links that brought Gandhian satyagraha strategies into the Rajputana princely states. As some maharajas of Rajputana replaced British lords as prime ministers of their realm with brilliant Indian Civil Service officers such as C. S. Venkatachattar, we can show in the most comprehensive way how an area was transformed without the massive tragedies that engulfed the rest of India at the time of Independence.