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978-0-521-46548-9 - Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India

Norbert Peabody

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## Hindu kingship and polity in precolonial India

Through the analysis of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts on the Hindu Kingdom of Kota in Rajasthan, Norbert Peabody explores the ways in which historical consciousness, or memory, is culturally constructed and how this consciousness informs social experience. By building on the premise that no society receives the past in a transparent, universal and objective way, he unravels how the past in Kota has been fashioned. His analysis demonstrates how different styles of historical interpretation sustain different regimes, and how specific varieties of social and political activity are founded upon these different perceptions of the past. In this way, he suggests not only that different societies establish different coordinates of value in their constructions of the past, but also that the very processes of social and political transformation differ from society to society. This is a fascinating and challenging book which promises to become a classic in the field.

NORBERT PEABODY is the Graduate Officer in Research at the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge.

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You see before you the wrath of the lord breaking forth... There is naught but towns emptied of their folk, monasteries razed to the ground or given to flames, fields desolated... . Everywhere the strong oppreseth the weak and men are like fish of the sea that blindly devour each other.

– The bishops of Rheims assembled at Trosly in A.D. 909  
(cited in Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 3.)

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## Contents

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<i>Sources</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Conventions followed in the text</i>	xii
1 Introduction: The logic of the fish	1
2 The king is dead, long live the king!: Karmic kin(g)ship in Kota	15
3 In whose turban does the lord reside?: Kings, saints, and merchants in western India	50
4 Military fiscalism and the cultural economy of devotion in eighteenth-century Rajasthan	80
5 From 'royal service' to 'maternal devotion' during the Jhala Regency: Local politics at the end of the old regime	112
6 An incidental history of a supplementary article: Hindu kin(g)ship and early colonial rule	147
7 Conclusion: Beyond orientalism	168
<i>Glossary</i>	171
<i>Bibliography</i>	174
<i>Index</i>	186

## Sources

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The material presented in this book draws, in part, on three of my previously published essays. These are:

‘The King is Dead, Long Live the King!, or Karmic Kin(g)ship in Kotah’, in *Gods, Kings, and Tigers: The Art of Kotah*, ed. Stuart Cary Welch (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1997), pp. 73–82.

‘In Whose Turban Does the Lord Reside?: The Objectification of Charisma and the Fetishism of Objects in the Hindu Kingdom of Kota’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, 4 (October 1991): 726–754.

‘Kota Mahajagat, or the Great Universe of Kota: Sovereignty and Territory in 18th Century Rajasthan’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (N.S.) 25, 1 (January–June 1991): 29–56.

In some instances, the substance of these articles has been subtly reworked; in other instances, it has been massively transformed; and in yet other instances, it has not been altered at all. Whatever the case, I hope that, in bringing this material together in this way, I have managed to present in this book a picture of kingship in Kota that is greater than the sum of its constituent parts.

## Illustrations

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### Plates

1	Maharao Bhim Singh on his war elephant shoots an arrow	19
2	Maharao Bhim Singh of Kota beheads Qilich Khan	19
3	Raja Gaj Singh of Narwar and Ratan Singh of Ratlam advance into enemy lines	23
4	A Muslim nawab, probably Dost Muhammad Khan, flees the ambush of Qilich Khan	24
5	Maharao Bhim Singh dismounts his elephant	25
6	Maharao Durjan Sal of Kota presents offerings to Shri Brijnathji as Maharao Bhim Singh holds a morchal over the deity	33
7	Maharao Brijraj Singh of Kota and royal attendants worshipping a painted image of Maharao Bhim Singh on Dasahra, 1993	44
8	Shri Nathji, worshipped by Tilkayat Dauji II, head priest of the Shri Nathji Temple	51
9	Shri Brijnathji, worshipped by Tilkayat Dauji II and Maharao Kishor Singh of Kota	65

### Figures

1	The ruling Hada lineage of Kota until 1827	27
2	The 'celestial tree' of Vallabhacharya showing the distribution of the Sampraday's 'nine treasures'	59
3	The quarrelsome descendants of Balkrishna	77
4	The lineage of Jhala Zalim Singh	117
5	The Jagirdars of Aton, Itawa, and Sorkhand	121

### Maps

1	Western India with the contemporary boundaries of Rajasthan	16
2	Kota state ca. 1820	119

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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A well-known Hindi proverb, oft-repeated by British colonial officials, claims that in India ‘the language changes every four *kos*,<sup>1</sup> the water every two’ (*kos kos pai pani badle, char kos pai ban*).<sup>2</sup> Though this proverb, in British hands, naturalized Indian unintelligibility and irrationality, through the instrumentality of water, and moralized it, through the root metaphor of Babel, it does alert us to a linguistic complexity that characterizes many parts of India. The arguments presented in this book draw upon sources written in four interrelated languages: Hindi, Middle Marwari, Braj Bhasha, and Dingal.

In order to enhance the recognizability of Indian terms amidst this linguistic complexity, I have chosen to render all words in their standard Hindi form rather than their other avatars. There are two exceptions to this general rule. First, I employ Sanskritic spellings (with the word final and intersyllabic /a/) for terms that have already entered the academic lexicon through the tradition of Indology. I thus write *dharma* instead of *dharm*. By the same token, I retain the word final /a/ for words ending in conjunct consonants, such as *mantra* or *bhakta*, where they are commonly vocalized today. Second, when transliterating longer phrases or sentences, I retain the spellings of the original language.

I employ customary English spellings for proper names, place names, or personal titles. Finally, in pluralizing Indian words when used in the context of an English language sentence, I follow the English pattern by adding an /s/ at the end of the term. As non-specialist readers tend to find

<sup>1</sup> One *kos* equals approximately two miles or three kilometres.

<sup>2</sup> David Magier reports of a similar Marwari maxim from western Rajasthan: *baram kosam bhasa badle, tisam kosam mausim*, or ‘language changes every twelve *kos*, weather every thirty’. See Magier, ‘The Language of the Bard’, in *A Carnival of Parting*, by A. Gold (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 339. In the Hadauti language of southeastern Rajasthan there is a further related couplet, *boli boli ko antro, boli boli ko pharak/ap kaho pharista, mhan kahan jarakh*, or ‘languages differ so much [from place to place] that [when] you say [the word for] angel, I understand [lit. ‘say’, the word for] hyena’.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Conventions followed in the text

xiii

diacritical marks off-putting (and specialist readers find them unnecessary), I have not employed them. Otherwise, I generally employ the transliteration scheme used by R. S. McGregor in *The Oxford Hindi–English Dictionary*. Indian words are only italicized the first time that I introduce them in the book.