



The Crisis of Patrimonial Bureaucracy in an Indian Princely State: Gwalior, 1886-1956

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VIA Zoom

Guest Speaker: Shashank Singh

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The presentation will focus upon the administrative and political crisis in the princely state of Gwalior (now a district in the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh) in the late 19th- mid 20th century. Gwalior was one of the nearly 600 princely states that were brought under a system of 'indirect rule' by the British in 1818, with the Scindia family ruling it since the 18th century. The British colonial government had put constraints on the political and economic choices of Scindias and frequently intervened in their internal affairs through political officers who were posted in Gwalior durbar (court). Further, the administrative and political structure of Gwalior was based upon the patrimonial system. It implied a type of authority where the administrative officials were responsible to the ruler personally.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British intervention in the administration of Gwalior disturbed the traditional political culture which stimulated a bureaucratic and political crisis in the state. When the British tried to replace the patrimonial system with a 'modern' bureaucratic structure during this period, it entailed uprooting the entire set of ideas and norms which had hitherto sustained the political order in Gwalior. As the ruling Scindia and traditional aristocracy strove to retain their influence and authority in the state administration, the clash between two value systems, one based on personal rights and another objective norm, became inevitable. The aim of this presentation thus, is two-fold – first, to analyse the crisis of patrimonial bureaucracy in Gwalior; and second, to explain how the persistence of patrimonial features in the post-colonial Indian administrative structure lies at the heart of the ongoing crisis of bureaucratic and democratic institutions in India.

Shashank Singh is currently a PhD candidate at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He specializes in the social and political history of colonial India with specific interest to princely states. His research focuses upon the political culture of the princely state of Gwalior and its interaction with the colonial modernity. It explores how did the Indian princes maintain their sovereignty when the British had considerably transformed the political as well as cultural basis of their legitimacy. The research helps to understand the persistent appeal of princely idioms and personages in the political culture of contemporary India.