

## Surat Under the Raj

A review by Vinay Lal

Douglas E. Haynes. *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 363 pp. \$49.95, cloth.

**Originally published as "Surat Under the Raj", review of Douglas Haynes, Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India, *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 18 (1 May 1993):863-865. Copyright: Author.**

The accommodation to, and contestation of, colonial rule by Indian 'elites' has long been a subject of great interest to historians of modern India, and Douglas Haynes' monograph, which focuses on the politics of Surat, is a contribution, albeit with a difference, to that literature. One would have thought that this subject had been pretty much exhausted; indeed, over the last decade or so the more prominent works in Indian historiography have taken us along different directions, so that the voices we hear now are mainly of women, peasants, rebels, and other 'subalterns', and government functionaries or English-educated Indians do not appear to be the only sources of 'agency'. Haynes returns us to a preoccupation of the earliest literature, that is the appropriation by Indians of liberal or 'Western' political values, but he does so with interpretive models that in his view owe more to Gramsci, ethnohistory, and 'cultural studies' than they do to Weberian social science, which has long been dominant in the American academy, with its emphasis on 'modernization', 'Westernization', and rationality. Haynes proposes, in short, to infuse his work with a focus on "politics as symbolic action and discursive practice", so that the intrusion of democratic values into political life is seen less as the consequence of "forces external to the political process" than as a process resulting from "day-to-day struggles for power and justice under colonial domination" (p. 5). Haynes rejects the 'evolutionary' model whereby the emergence of democracy is seen as "an outgrowth of a universal human drive for freedom (as defined in Western terms)" and the acceptance by the non-Western world of the values associated with liberalism as somehow "natural". It is the tension between the appeal of Western ideas, and the constraints that colonialism necessarily imposed in the shaping of a democratic ethos, that informs Haynes' exploration of the political culture that South Asian elites set out to fashion for themselves.

It is with a quick sweep that Haynes traces the history of Surat from the seventeenth century, when it occupied a dominant place in India's domestic and international trade, to the late nineteenth century, by which time it had been reduced to something of a mofussil town, certainly a pale image of its former self, hovering in the shadows of Bombay's gigantic hulk. The "serious contraction" in Surat's economic activity owed a great deal, in the first instance, to the "growing insecurity of trade routes in the Mughal empire" and increased pressures upon traders by Mughal noblemen, and secondly to the establishment of British colonial rule. Throughout this period of decline, and indeed into the twentieth century, there remained intact what Haynes, obviously invoking E. P. Thompson, calls a "moral economy of domestic manufacture". Business relationships were built around certain social ties, whether constituted as "joint-family, caste, community, and patron-client relations", which ensured that even in times of hardship and financial insecurity merchants and artisans were not left without some means of pecuniary

support. As Haynes points out, an understanding of this moral economy would suggest the severe shortcomings of social science models that posit an incompatibility between these kinds of social structures and market-oriented economies (p. 39). Although colonialism wrought great changes, and compelled the residents of Surat to adjust to new institutions, such as railways, postal services, and customs, indigenous commercial networks displayed a remarkable resilience (pp. 45-46). Surat was not only able to retain its niche, howsoever small, within the metropolitan colonial economy by sustaining "forms of commerce that did not compete with European products", such as trade in pearls and spirals of silver and silver gilt, but it also reproduced "preexisting social relations" (p. 50). Perhaps the transition from 'status' to 'contract' was not as complete as some historians have suggested.

Haynes moves from the larger picture to a more microscopic view of the different social groups that comprised Surat's population. Under the rubric of the "inner politics of the city", he considers the idioms by means of which members of the merchant castes marked their presence, and also the place of Hindu "communities of low and middle status", Muslims, and Parsis in the economic, social, and culture life of Surat. Merchants engaged in religious giving because they no doubt saw it as a form of *dharmic* activity, but just as significantly it allowed the transformation of "financial capital" into "symbolic capital" that worked to generate and enhance their standing within the community. Religious munificence is, as Haynes notes, "common to Hindu commercial communities all over India", but it has had a special place in Surat and the rest of Gujarat (p. 60). There the *mahajans*, tightly-knit organizations constituting a form of corporate activity, wielded an enormous influence not only in commercial affairs, but in the civic life of the community as well by endeavoring "to protect the economy of trust from being overwhelmed by a commerce based on contract and courtroom" (pp. 62-63). When, for example, famine struck in 1899-1900, the mahajans not only created Hindu orphanages, but also exercised pressure upon grain merchants, accompanied by the threat of sanctions, to cease all exports (pp. 66-67). Whatever the impulses of capitalism, and the institutional pressures of colonial rule, the inner life of the Hindu communities continued to reproduce a social order where questions of family status and reputation remained predominant, "in which older idioms of authority met the challenges posed by changes in the larger world", and "collectivities based upon descent often retained the cohesion necessary to enforce a wide range of group norms" (p. 80). Much like the Hindus, the Muslims and Parsis too persisted with the structures and idioms of their social life, and "not because of any inherent intransigence to change", which is what those who argue for an inalienable divide between a 'stagnant' India and an ever-changing West would like us to believe, "but because these social forms remained relevant to the material and psychic needs of the population" (p. 80).

Surat's residents lived, from the sixteenth century onwards, under the rule of outsiders. The "outer politics" of the city was thus characterized by accommodation to the Mughals and then the British, and this took the form of deferential behavior, tribute, acceptance of imperial patronage, and even small acts of resistance. Haynes does not dwell very long on Surat under the Mughals, for it is the advent of a new public culture under the British, succeeding the initial establishment of what Haynes calls the "Anglo-Bania Order", that is the subject of his study. In the evolution of this public culture, "public opinion" was to assume great importance, for though the colonizers might argue that "public opinion" could have no conceivable authority among a heterogeneous mass of largely illiterate people without any experience of governing themselves, the indigenous

elites were to have increasing success in their appeal to "public opinion" as they strove to create a movement for independence. "Public opinion", however, was not the only term in the emerging lexicon with "particular potency for the ruling group"; other "keywords and phrases" were "natural leader, loyalty, public, nation, representation, political education, devolution of power, Muslim backwardness, improvement, and moral and material progress" (p. 107). It is to the political participation that was devised around this vocabulary that Haynes then turns his attention.

If colonialism was unable to impact greatly the idioms by which Surtis conducted their private lives, in the "civic arena", by contrast, Anglo-Indian political idioms were decisive in shaping the contours of Indian political activity and defining the parameters of Indian political discourses. The newly emerging English-educated elites, seeking to justify their assumption of leadership roles, turned to "British historical theories" to suggest that there was "a universal tendency for societies to move from social stages in which leadership was based upon hereditary qualities to those in which it was founded upon public capabilities" (p. 163). To take another example, when the notables active in the municipality invoked the idea of 'improvement', they were evidently speaking the language of British reformers (p. 156). They might have disputed with the British where Indians stood on the evolutionary scale from 'backward' to 'progressive', or how far Indians had moved from habitation in 'village communities' to creating institutions with a measure of self-governance, but they did not dispute that there was such a scale (p. 146). Indian elites did not, in other words, effect any epistemological breakthrough: they did not doubt that British and European models of what we would today call social science discourse mapped the reality of Indian social and political life, and provided the knowledge by which India could be known, but questioned only the motives of some British writers and scholar-administrators and their findings by which Indians were condemned to remain in a perpetual stage of inferiority and tutelage. As one might expect, the most frequent complaint of Indian elites was that the colonizers frequently did not themselves honor their obligation to uphold the values they had espoused. Could, for instance, the British claim a unique adherence to the 'rule of law' when brutal techniques of repression were the order of the day? If one were to adopt Haynes' view, then what is most illustrative about such a claim is precisely that Indians never contested the normative value of the 'rule of law' but only the appropriateness of the view that it was by the 'rule of law' that the Empire claimed the allegiance of natives.

The hegemony of colonial rule was such that a "thoroughgoing critique of the political order that might have informed a sustained, collective resistance to the Raj" could not be developed. In the arena of ritual, as the nationalist movement grew in strength, "symbolic substitutions" marked the extreme limits of what nationalists could hope to achieve. So, at nationalist durbars, the "prominent visiting congress leader assumed the place of the governor or viceroy", "the [Home Rule] League replaced the municipal council as chief sponsor of the visit", and so forth (p. 195). Haynes concedes that the years 1919-1924, the first significant phase of a mass movement for independence, represented a "counter-hegemonic" moment. It was in this period that Indian elites, under the leadership of Gandhi, while still employing the "vocabulary of public politics" were able to steer it away "from its moorings in evolutionary thought", so that service to "the nation, the people, and public good" were "radically dissociated from the notions of loyalty, progress, the law, and responsible self-government" (p. 219). At the same time, a more indigenous discourse of *dharma*, *satya*, *ahimsa*, *tyag*, *tapasya*, *bhog*, *pratishtha*, *sharam*, and

*prayaschit* was revalorized or otherwise given political currency so as to evoke the idea of a politics that would be divorced neither from spirituality nor from morality. However, this "counter-hegemonic" discourse could not be sustained for long, partly because of the withdrawal of the lower classes from the noncooperation movement, and partly because of a growing feeling among Muslims that there would be little place for them in an independent India. Most significantly, the elites returned to "constitutional politics", which had an endurance that alternative styles of politics could not command, and which lured by its promise of the spoils of office. The last twenty years or more of British rule were, in Haynes' view, signified by the "restoration of hegemony".

The analysis Haynes offers of the "Gandhian interlude" and, as it were, its communal aftermath is quite commonplace and not wholly convincing. It need not detain us, for it is to Haynes' central arguments, and to certain questions of methodology and epistemology, that we must now turn. Haynes had, at the very outset, promised to free Indian historiography from the shackles of that massively disabling vocabulary of evolutionary thought typified by the notions of 'Westernization' and 'modernization', and his chosen vehicle for doing so is the notion of 'hegemony'. But is his departure from the evolutionary model all that significant, given that he performs has to confine his analysis to the 'elites'? His excuse for ignoring the 'masses' is that politics under the colonial dispensation required the presence of "symbolic specialists" who were just as conversant with the idioms of indigenous culture as they were with the idioms of Anglo-Indian politics (p. 15). However, what is it that enables Haynes to make so sharp a break between the 'elites' and the 'masses', a break that can then be described as being mediated by a very small class of "symbolic specialists", if not another kind of evolutionary model? Haynes, to appropriate his own mode of argumentation, retains the "grammar" of American social science discourse, substituting for the 'Western-educated' and 'modernizing' elites a vocabulary of "symbolic specialists" and other masters of "bilingualism" (eg., p. 191).

If Haynes is unable to escape altogether from the manichean dualism of 'elites' and 'masses', he fails equally to pursue the ramifications and difficulties of transferring a political theory from the European context to colonial India. The notion of a "limited and negotiated hegemony" offers, in Haynes' view, a "conceptual alternative to approaches that currently imbue popular understandings of cultural change in the "Third World", but this leads of course to the obvious query: Is "it really possible to test the validity of Gramscian propositions in colonial contexts?" (p. 16) Haynes proceeds, as we have seen, to offer an analysis whereby Indian political activity is construed as taking place within the hegemonic framework established by the British, but this analysis loses much of its resonance in theoretical terms on account of his rather uncritical investment in the notion of 'hegemony'. To meaningfully pose questions about the transference of a political theory, in this instance 'hegemony', would entail some reflections about the place of hegemony in Gramsci's political philosophy, and the philosophical and sociological implications of comparative historicization of hegemony. Nor is this all: hegemony emerges in Haynes' work as so overdetermined a concept as to disallow any space within which Indian nationalists could have attained an epistemological autonomy. Thus, according to Haynes, even "the most ambitious goal they [the elites] expressed -- the establishment of home rule -- seemed to involve the insertion of Indians in slots now held by the British rather than the creation of a new sort of political system" (p. 197). He is right in pointing out that the mere substitution of brown sahibs for white men can scarcely be construed as evidence of an alternative politics, but he says

nothing of what a "new sort of political system" might look like. Had the elites turned to some variation of communism or socialism, they would still stand condemned as imitators, as emulators of European idioms of political behavior, for Marxism, much like parliamentary democracy, too is of European vintage.

There is, in Haynes' book, a frequent slippage into the very modes of discourse that he seeks to avoid. When he states, for example, that "there were times when the expansion of British power was as much a response to indigenous pressure as it was an outgrowth of a drive for empire issuing from the English" (pp. 89-90), the argument sounds suspiciously akin to pronouncements from historians of the 'Cambridge School' about British adventurism as a 'reluctant imperialism'. The similarity with the 'Cambridge School' does not end there: certainly there are moments in Haynes' writing when it appears that it was the lot of Indians to merely react, for only the British were endowed with agency. Although Haynes himself is far removed from any kind of communal outlook, his arrangement of the material at hand is quite unfortunate. His treatment of the subject matter reinforces the importance of religion as an organizing principle of Indian history and culture. Thus his discussion of the "inner politics" of Surat, particularly of religious giving, is not dialogic or dialectical, but along the lines of what each religious group -- Hindu, Muslim, and Parsi -- did in turn (pp. 52-80). In his discussion of philanthropy among the "bilingual notables", Haynes similarly comments on the prevalence of this activity among the Hindus, and then proceeds to look at the Muslims and Parsis (pp. 121-26). In the last analysis, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India* gives the appearance of being rather too neat, orderly, and systematic. However, it is the very presentation that also makes the shortcomings somewhat less obvious, and there is no doubt that, in its intricate and finely textured discussion of the local politics of Surat under the Raj, it constitutes a worthwhile addition to the historiography of modern India.