

MAJOR TREATIES BETWEEN THE PRINCELY STATES OF RAJASTHAN AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE: THE CONTEXT OF BIKANER

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Abstract:

The period of 1817-18 AD marks a significant turning point in the history of Rajputana, with the relationship between the princely states and the British Empire undergoing substantial changes. Before this period, Rajasthan was characterized by political instability and anarchy, often referred to as 'Jungle Raj,' due to the prevailing insecurity caused by inter-state conflicts and invasions by the Pindaris, Marathas, and Amir Khan. However, the post-1817 period, while offering peace and security, witnessed the growing interference of the British in the internal affairs of the princely states, leading to the erosion of their autonomy under the guise of 'British sovereignty.' This paper explores the treaties signed between the British Empire and the princely states of Rajasthan, with a focus on the Bikaner state. The study analyzes the historical context, key clauses, and the impact of these treaties on the sovereignty and governance of Bikaner, highlighting the shrewd strategies employed by the British to entangle the princely states in a web of dependency and control.

Keywords: Rajputana, British Empire, Bikaner Princely State, Treaties, British Sovereignty, Autonomy, Colonialism, Rajasthan History, Marathas, Pindaris

Introduction:

The years 1817-18 AD represent a crucial turning point in the history of Rajputana, a region characterized by a patchwork of independent princely states, each governed by its own monarch (Kumar, 2021). Prior to this period, Rajputana was mired in political instability, widespread chaos, and insecurity. The region, comprising states such as Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, and others, was constantly under threat from external and internal forces. Inter-state wars, fueled by rivalries and power struggles among the princely rulers, were common, leading to a fractured political landscape (Naravane, 1999).

Additionally, the encroachments by the Marathas, the Pindaris, and mercenaries like Amir Khan added to the turmoil (Ghosh, 1964). The Marathas, after their rise to power following the decline of the Mughal Empire, sought to expand their influence into Rajasthan, imposing tributes and extracting wealth from the already beleaguered states. The Pindaris, a loosely organized group of plunderers, further destabilized the region by conducting raids and looting, contributing to a state of near anarchy. Amir Khan, a former Mughal officer who became a powerful warlord, added to the chaos by leading his own band of mercenaries, disrupting the fragile peace in many parts of Rajasthan.

Garg, 2022 stated that this era of political turmoil, often referred to as 'Jungle Raj,' saw the princely states of Rajasthan struggling to maintain their sovereignty and control over their territories. The rulers, caught between defending their domains and navigating the complex web of alliances and enmities, found it increasingly difficult to govern effectively. The constant threats from within and outside their borders left the states vulnerable, and their autonomy was gradually being eroded. Amidst this backdrop of uncertainty and instability, the British East India Company, which had been steadily expanding its influence in India, began to focus on Rajputana. With the weakening of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the Marathas, the British

saw an opportunity to establish themselves as the dominant power in the region(Howard, 2017). Their primary goal was to create a stable and secure frontier that could serve as a buffer against potential invasions from the north-west, particularly from Afghanistan and Persia. Moreover, the British were keen to secure their interests in India by ensuring that no other European power, such as the French, could gain a foothold in the region.

To achieve these objectives, the British embarked on a strategy of forging alliances with the princely states through a series of treaties. These treaties were presented as defensive pacts aimed at providing protection to the states from external threats, particularly the Marathas and the Pindaris(Chhabra, 2005). However, the underlying motive of the British was to bring these states under their control, thereby extending their influence over the entire region. The treaties were designed in such a way that they gradually reduced the sovereignty of the princely states, making them dependent on the British for their security and governance.

This research paper examines the historical context and significance of the treaties signed between the British Empire and the princely states of Rajasthan during this critical period. The focus of the study is on the state of Bikaner, one of the prominent princely states in the region. By analyzing the major treaties, the key clauses within them, and their implications for Bikaner's sovereignty and governance, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship that developed between the princely states and the British during the early 19th century.

The treaties between the British and the princely states were not mere diplomatic agreements; they were instruments of colonial expansion and control. These treaties often included clauses that restricted the ability of the states to form alliances with other powers, imposed British control over their military and foreign affairs, and required the states to pay tribute or provide military support to the British. In the case of Bikaner, the treaties had far-reaching consequences, leading to a significant loss of autonomy and the eventual integration of the state into the British Empire. The study also explores the broader implications of these treaties for the princely states, particularly in terms of their sovereignty, governance, and the preservation of their cultural and political identities.

Historical Context:

The Situation in Rajasthan Before 1817-18: In the second half of the eighteenth century, the weakening of Mughal power in North India led to the rise of the Marathas, who gradually established themselves as a dominant force in the region. The Marathas not only played a decisive role in major political events but also posed a significant threat to the stability of the princely states of Rajasthan. By 1784, Mahadaji Scindia, one of the prominent Maratha leaders, had established his influence in the Mughal court, serving as Vakil-e-Mutlaq (Regent)(Salma Ahmed, 2011). The growing power of Scindia and his French commanders in the Mughal court alarmed the British, particularly at a time when Napoleon's influence was rising in Europe.

The appointment of Lord Wellesley as the Governor-General of India in 1798 marked the beginning of a more aggressive British policy towards the Marathas. The Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-05) was primarily aimed at curbing the influence of the Marathas and their French allies in the Mughal court. The British sought to establish their dominance in Delhi and weaken the Marathas' control over the region(Kaushik, 2005).

As part of this strategy, the British government authorized General Lake, the British Commander-in-Chief, to enter into defensive treaties with various princely states of Rajasthan. States such as Bharatpur, Alwar, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Pratapgarh signed treaties with the British, aligning themselves with the growing British power in the region. The defeat of the Marathas in the Anglo-Maratha War led to the establishment of a British Residency in Delhi in 1803, where a British Resident represented the Company government in the Mughal court and, increasingly, in the affairs of the Rajputana states.

British Policy and the Princely States of Rajasthan: The financial strain caused by the wars against the Marathas led the East India Company's Court of Directors to seek peace in India. Lord Cornwallis, who succeeded Wellesley as Governor-General, adopted a policy of non-interference, canceling previous treaties while maintaining those with Dholpur, Bharatpur, and Alwar (Holmes, 1955). However, this policy of non-interference allowed the Marathas and Pindaris to continue their depredations in Rajasthan, further destabilizing the region. By the early 19th century, the situation in Rajasthan had deteriorated to the point where many princely states, including Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur, were financially and politically weakened. Internal strife, political conspiracies, and the incessant raids by the Marathas and Pindaris had left the princely states in a vulnerable position.

Lord Hastings, who became Governor-General in 1813, shifted the British policy from non-interference to active intervention (Ashton, 1977). Delhi Resident C.T. Metcalfe proposed a plan to offer British protection to the princely states through defensive treaties, aimed at curbing the influence of the Marathas, Pindaris, and Amir Khan. This policy marked the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between the British and the princely states, one characterized by increasing British interference in the internal affairs of the states.

Table 1: Major Treaties Between the Princely States of Rajasthan and the British Empire, Their Conditions and Impact

S.No.	State	Date of Treaty	Key Clauses	Impact on State	Special Conditions	British Interests
1	Jaipur	2 April 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military support to the British on demand	Loss of sovereignty; Reduction in military power	Shift of loyalty of Khetri and Uniara to the British; Jaipur agreed to all terms under pressure	Protection of revenue and military resources; Jaipur would be isolated from other states
2	Jodhpur	6 January 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of 1500 horsemen and entire army on British demand	Loss of sovereignty; Dependency on British external threats	Provision of internal security force to remain under Jodhpur's control	British control over Jodhpur's military resources
3	Udaipur	13 January 1818	- Subordination to British Government - No British interference in internal matters (nominal)	Maharana's authority weakened; British political agent controlled state affairs	Clause 9 allowed nominal autonomy but in practice, the British agent had control	Ensuring British authority in governance while maintaining a façade of local autonomy
4	Kota	26 December 1817	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military forces when needed	Loss of sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection	-	British control over Kota's military resources
5	Bikaner	9 March	- Subordination	Bikaner had to	Clause 10 enforced	British interest in

		1818	to British Government - Security of trade routes - Control over toll and customs rates	ensure trade route safety for British; Loss of sovereignty	British control over trade routes passing through Bikaner; Clause 7 mandated suppression of unruly Thakurs	safe trade routes and military control
6	Bundi	10 February 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military forces when needed	Loss of sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection	-	British control over Bundi's military resources
7	Dungarpur	11 December 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Civil and criminal matters under local control (nominal)	Loss of autonomy; British government controlled major decisions	Clauses contradicted each other, giving the British actual control while allowing the Maharawal nominal power	British control over internal administration in Dungarpur
8	Pratapgarh	5 October 1818	- Subordination to British Government - No interference in internal administration (nominal)	British influence in state administration; Loss of autonomy	King to follow British advice on taxes and governance	Control over trade and suppression of rebellions
9	Sirohi	11 September 1823	- Subordination to British Government - State administration under British advice	Dependency on British; Sirohi functioned as a British colony	British control over customs, toll rates, and military in Sirohi	Ensuring trade safety, military logistics, and control over local administration
10	Karauli	9 November 1817	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military support	Loss of sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection	-	British control over Karauli's military resources
11	Jaisalmer	12 December 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military support	Loss of sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection	-	British control over Jaisalmer's military resources
12	Kishanga	26	- Subordination	Loss of	-	British control

	rh	March 1818	to British Government - Provision of military support	sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection		over Kishangarh's military resources
13	Banswara	25 December 1818	- Subordination to British Government - Provision of military support	Loss of British sovereignty; Dependency on British military protection	-	British control over Banswara's military resources
14	Alwar (Machedi)	1817-1818	- Subordination to British Government - Control over areas returned to Jaipur	Expansion of British influence; Loss of territorial control	of Rao of Machedi was warned by the British and lost areas he had captured from Jaipur	British interest in maintaining control over territories and stabilizing alliances in the region

The Treaties of 1817-18 and Their Impact on Bikaner: The treaties signed between the British and the princely states of Rajasthan in 1817-18 marked a significant shift in the balance of power in the region. The princely states, including Bikaner, were forced to accept British sovereignty, effectively reducing them to subordinate allies of the British Empire(Keen, 2012). The British used a combination of diplomatic pressure, strategic alliances, and military threats to compel the states to sign these treaties.

The treaty with Bikaner, signed on 9 March 1818, included several clauses that reflected the British strategy of controlling the princely states. The treaty ensured that Bikaner would remain isolated from other states, prohibiting any alliances or agreements without British approval(Purcell, 2010). The British government also took responsibility for the security of Bikaner, while the state was required to provide military support to the British when requested. One of the key clauses in the Bikaner treaty related to the control of trade routes. Given Bikaner's strategic location, the British sought to ensure that trade routes passing through the state remained safe and that customs duties were not increased, thus facilitating British trade interests.

Main Clauses of the Treaties: The treaties signed between the British Empire and the princely states of Rajasthan in 1817-18 shared several common clauses, while also including specific provisions tailored to the interests of the British government in each state.

General Conditions: The treaties of 1817-18 marked a departure from earlier treaties based on allied-security systems. The new treaties required the princely states to accept British sovereignty and operate as subordinate allies. Key clauses included:

1. **Isolation of States:** The treaties aimed to prevent any unity among the princely states by prohibiting alliances and agreements without British approval. This clause was designed to isolate the states and prevent any collective resistance to British control.
2. **Acceptance of British Supremacy:** The princely states were required to accept the British government as the supreme authority. Any disputes between states were to be referred to the British government for arbitration, effectively reducing the autonomy of the princely states.

3. **Military Support:** The states were required to provide military support to the British government when requested. In some cases, states were required to pay regular tribute to the British government.

Special Conditions: In addition to the general conditions, the treaties with certain states included special clauses that addressed specific British interests:

1. **Bikaner:** The treaty with Bikaner included a clause that ensured the safety of trade routes passing through the state and prohibited the increase of customs duties. The British also took responsibility for controlling unruly Thakurs and other rebels in the state, with the cost of such military operations to be borne by the Bikaner state.
2. **Jodhpur:** The treaty with Jodhpur required the state to provide a contingent of 1,500 horsemen to the British government when requested, and, if necessary, to place the entire army of the state at the disposal of the British, except for those troops needed for internal administration.
3. **Udaipur, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh, and Banswara:** The treaties with these states included clauses that ostensibly protected the sovereignty of the rulers but also required them to follow the advice of the British government in matters of governance.
4. **Sirohi:** The treaty with Sirohi included provisions that effectively turned the state into a British dependency. The state was required to follow the advice of British officers in all matters of governance, and British officials were granted the authority to set toll and customs duty rates.

Table 2: Treaty Conditions of the Maharaja of Bikaner with the British Government

Condition	Details	Responsibility	Action Required	Consequences
Friendship and Unity	Relationship of continuous friendship, mutual harmony, and unity of interests between the British Government and Maharaja Surat Singh. Friends and enemies are considered as such by both parties.	Maharaja Surat Singh, British Government	Maintain friendship and unity of interests.	N/A
Protection	The British Government agrees to protect the state of Bikaner and its country.	British Government	Provide protection to Bikaner	N/A
Subservient Cooperation	Maharaja and successors will accept British supremacy, maintain cooperation, and not establish relations with other kings or states.	Maharaja Surat Singh, Successors	Accept British supremacy and avoid relations with other states.	Potential conflict with British Government
Treaty Restrictions	No treaty with other kings or states without British permission, though ordinary correspondence with	Maharaja Surat Singh, Successors	Seek British permission before entering treaties with other states	Possible diplomatic issues

	friends and relatives is allowed.			
Justice and Disputes	Maharaja will not commit injustice. Disputes will be referred to the British Government for mediation and decision.	Maharaja Surat Singh, British Government	Present disputes to the British Government	Resolution through British mediation
Suppression of Robbers	Maharaja agrees to return looted property and suppress robbers. If unable, British assistance will be provided, with Maharaja bearing expenses or ceding part of the state.	Maharaja Surat Singh	Return looted property and suppress robbers. Seek British assistance if needed.	Loss of state territory or financial burden
Rebellion Management	On demand, British Government will subdue rebels within Bikaner. Maharaja will bear military expenses or cede part of the state if unable to pay.	Maharaja Surat Singh	Bear expenses or cede part of state if unable to manage rebellion.	Potential loss of state territory or financial burden
Military Support	Maharaja will provide an army according to his strength when requested by the British Government.	Maharaja Surat Singh	Provide army support as required	Possible strain on resources
Independence of State	Maharaja and successors will remain independent. The British Government will not enter the state.	Maharaja Surat Singh, British Government	Ensure independence and non-interference by British Government	N/A
Trade Route Safety	Maharaja will make the route of Bikaner and Bhatner safe for trade with Kabul and Khurasan. Ensure safe travel for traders and no increase in toll rates.	Maharaja Surat Singh	Improve route safety and maintain toll rates	Enhanced trade, potential economic benefits
Agreement Documentation	The agreement was stamped and signed by Mr. Charles Theophilus Metcalfe and Ojha Kashinath. Copies attested by the Governor General and Maharaja	Mr. Charles Theophilus Metcalfe, Ojha Kashinath	Exchange copies of the agreement	Official documentation and mutual recognition

	Surat Singh to be exchanged twenty days after the date.			
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Table 3: Effects of the British Treaties on the Princely States

Aspect	Details	Impact
Financial Strain	States had to pay tribute, leading to increased debt and financial strain	Financial difficulties and increased dependence on British
Economic Exploitation	British control over trade, customs, and resources like opium and salt	Economic manipulation and extraction of resources
Political Control	British sovereignty established through various means including appointments and interventions	Diminished sovereignty of princely states
Violation of Terms	of British government often violated treaty conditions for their benefit	Erosion of trust and increased British dominance
Long-Term Sovereignty Impact	States' sovereignty became increasingly compromised over time	Gradual loss of autonomy and increased British control

Conclusion: The treaties signed between the princely states of Rajputana, including Bikaner, and the British government in the early 19th century marked a pivotal shift in the region's political landscape. Under the leadership of Lord Hastings, the British government sought to consolidate its power by negotiating agreements with these states to curtail the influence of the Marathas, Pindaris, and Amir Khan. The treaties aimed to restore order and establish British dominance by imposing conditions that necessitated the acceptance of British supremacy, the maintenance of a subordinate alliance, and adherence to British mediation in disputes. For Bikaner, the treaty with the British government signified a formal acknowledgment of British authority, transforming the state's political and economic dynamics. The agreement entailed continuous friendship with the British, protection of the state, and a commitment to avoid any external alliances without British consent. While the immediate impact of the treaty brought stability and security to Bikaner by ending external threats and internal chaos, the long-term consequences were detrimental. The heavy financial burden of regular tributes, coupled with increasing British interference in administrative matters, gradually undermined the autonomy of Bikaner. The state's economic stability was compromised as it became reliant on loans and mortgages to meet the demands imposed by the British. Furthermore, the introduction of British administrative practices and officers altered the traditional governance structures, weakening the king's control and distancing him from his subjects.

Over time, the relationship between Bikaner and the British government evolved from one based on treaty provisions to one dictated by British interests. This shift marked the erosion of princely sovereignty and the entrenchment of British control, leading to a situation where the princely states, including Bikaner, found themselves increasingly subservient to British rule. The treaties thus not only established British hegemony but also laid the groundwork for a more profound and pervasive control over the princely states. The promise of protection and stability came at the cost of autonomy and economic independence, ultimately shaping the political trajectory of Bikaner and other princely states in Rajasthan.

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18. Paulet; Gazetteer of Bikaner State; Page 78
19. Veervinod also writes about Thakur of Churu taking his fort, but in it the year 1873 (AD 1817) of this incident is given (Part 2, Page 509).