



Colonial Penetration and Administrative Transformation in Sirohi (1823–1947)

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ABSTRACT

Colonial influence in the princely state of Sirohi was not achieved by direct annexation. Rather, it grew as a result of a treaty relationship, political supervision, fiscal duties, control over foreign affairs and a step-by-step involvement in internal administration. The Treaty of 11 September 1823 was the key moment. It acknowledged British supremacy, limited the ruler's political contacts with other states, obliged the ruler to govern on the advice of the British, and introduced a tribute based on the state's revenues. These measures set up a system in which the Sirohi ruler kept his formal authority but exercised it more and more within the boundaries set by the superior power. In the nineteenth century this relationship was extended by means of the Political Agency, supervision of revenue and customs, military and security arrangements, and British control of strategically important areas such as Mount Abu. By the early twentieth century Sirohi had seen further administrative institutionalisation. Judicial reform, changes to the executive structure, the creation of advisory bodies and village-level institutions all appeared alongside the ongoing political supervision. In the 1930s and 1940s a new element was introduced: popular political mobilisation and calls for responsible government. The formation and activities of the Sirohi Praja Mandal brought about a change from the previous pattern of administration centred on the ruler. The paper contends that colonial influence therefore transformed Sirohi through a step-by-step process rather than by a single act of conquest. British paramountcy changed the meaning of sovereignty, while local rulers, officials, jagirdars, merchants and political activists determined how the administrative changes actually took place. The study concludes that by 1947 Sirohi was still a princely state, but its political and administrative structure had been greatly altered by more than a century of interaction with the colonial state.

Keywords: Sirohi, British paramountcy, colonialism, princely states, Rajputana, Political Agency, administrative transformation, Mount Abu, Praja Mandal, responsible government

1. INTRODUCTION

Sirohi held a special place in the political landscape of southern Rajputana; it was linked to the Deora Chauhan royal family and comprised a strategically significant area adjoining the Aravalli hills, Mount Abu and the roads that connect Rajasthan with Gujarat. Yet its political importance was not accompanied by any real military power. In the early nineteenth century the Sirohi ruler's authority was weakened by conflicts with neighbouring states, internal factionalism and pressures from local groups. It was therefore at a time when the very survival of the state was in doubt that it entered the British system of protection.



The way in which the British dealt with Sirohi must be seen in the context of the broader evolution of indirect rule in Rajputana. Following their campaigns against the Marathas and the Pindaris, the East India Company set up a series of treaties with the various Rajput states. As a result, a number of rulers were able to keep their dynasties and internal institutions while at the same time accepting British supremacy and having restrictions imposed on their foreign relations. It has been demonstrated by historians that this system of indirect rule did not amount to a lack of colonial power; on the contrary, the British created various mechanisms by means of which political advice, diplomatic supervision, military security and administrative intervention could go deep into the princely states (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1966; Jhala, 2019).

The Treaty of 1823 is the most clear-cut starting point for studying this process in Sirohi. The records of the treaty indicate that the ruler agreed to recognise British supremacy, promised not to have any political dealings with other chiefs, accepted the recommendations of the British Agent, committed himself to establishing an efficient administration and agreed to pay tribute based on a certain proportion of the revenue. As a result, the British pledged to give their protection and acknowledged the arrangements concerning succession. Thus, the treaty brought together security and subordination.

The period between 1823 and 1947 is important since it enables an examination of administrative change over a span of more than a century. In the **first stage**, British supervision was set up and the state was stabilised. During the **second stage**, colonial influence expanded to include fiscal, judicial and territorial issues, alongside an increasing role for Mount Abu. In the **third stage**, especially in the twentieth century, there was administrative institutionalisation and political reform. Lastly, in the **fourth stage**, between 1930s and 1940s, there was popular political mobilisation which questioned the boundaries of princely authority and linked Sirohi with the broader discussions on responsible government and Indian independence.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To examine the circumstances that brought Sirohi under British protection in 1823.
- To analyse the major provisions of the Treaty of 1823 and their administrative implications.
- To trace changes in revenue, judicial, political and territorial administration under British paramountcy.
- To examine the importance of Mount Abu and other strategic interests in the colonial relationship with Sirohi.
- To study administrative reforms and political developments in Sirohi during the twentieth century.
- To assess the role of popular political mobilisation and the Praja Mandal movement in the transformation of governance before 1947.
- To understand how colonial penetration altered the nature of sovereignty and state authority in Sirohi.



3. METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a historical and analytical method. It uses primary and near-primary materials such as treaty records, colonial administrative reports, the Imperial Gazetteer, India Office archival descriptions and official records relating to Sirohi. These are read alongside modern historical scholarship on princely states, British paramountcy and political change in Rajputana. The study is chronological but also thematic: political relations, revenue and fiscal control, judicial and administrative institutions, territorial interests and popular politics are considered together. Since the purpose is to explain historical transformation rather than to measure variables statistically, the paper relies on documentary interpretation, comparison and contextual analysis. Claims have been cross-checked where possible between official records and secondary historical studies.

4. TRANSFORMATION IN SIROHI (1823–1947)

Sirohi before the Treaty of 1823

Before receiving British protection, Sirohi was experiencing serious political and administrative problems. The state had been weakened by its conflicts with Jodhpur and by the state of insecurity in the areas surrounding it. According to the Imperial Gazetteer, certain Thakurs in the southern part of the state had broken off their allegiance and had looked for protection from neighbouring states. The central authority was thus under pressure from both external demands and internal division. Against this background, Rao Sheo Singh, who was at that time Regent, asked for British protection. The British looked into the political situation in Sirohi and rejected the argument that Jodhpur had a right of supremacy over the state. The significance of this decision was that it allowed the British to enter into a direct relationship with Sirohi.

The British intervention was at first not portrayed as an exercise in administrative conquest; instead it was presented as a way of protecting the state and keeping order. However, this protection led to a state of dependence; for once the power of the British military and political forces had become the guarantee of the ruler's position, the British then had a solid basis on which to supervise the way in which the state was run.

The Treaty of 11 September 1823: beginning of formal British penetration

The Treaty of 11 September 1823 transformed Sirohi's political position. It did not abolish the ruling house, nor did it convert Sirohi into a directly administered British district. Instead, it established a relationship of unequal partnership. The ruler retained internal authority in principle, while accepting British supremacy and important restrictions on independent action.

Table 1. Major Administrative Implications of the Treaty of 1823

Treaty provision	Immediate meaning	Long-term administrative effect
Acceptance of British supremacy	Sirohi acknowledged the paramount position of the British Government.	Reduced the state's independent diplomatic and political autonomy.
Restriction on	The ruler could not freely	External affairs increasingly

political intercourse	conduct relations with other chiefs.	came under British supervision.
Government according to British advice	The ruler accepted guidance from the British Agent.	Created a channel for intervention in internal administration.
Introduction of efficient administration	Administrative improvement became a treaty obligation.	Provided a formal justification for later British interference in governance.
Tribute linked to revenue	Sirohi was required to make a regular financial payment.	Strengthened British influence over the state's fiscal capacity.
British protection and succession guarantee	The ruling house received political protection.	Preserved the dynasty while making its security dependent on British paramountcy.

Source: Compiled from Aitchison (1909), the Imperial Gazetteer of India (1908) and the British archival record of Sirohi's treaty relationship.

5. FROM PROTECTION TO SUPERVISION: THE POLITICAL AGENCY AND INTERNAL ADMINISTRATION

A major result of the treaty was the expansion of the Political Agency into an intermediary role. The Political Agent was not merely a diplomatic representative; in a weak princely state the post might become concerned with issues of succession, the relations with the nobles, revenue, policing, military arrangements and disagreements between the ruler and the subordinate chiefs. According to Aitchison's collection of treaties, the initial weakness of Sirohi called for a high degree of British involvement in the state's internal matters, and rebellious Thakurs and armed groups were handled by combining state action with British intervention.

This example shows a key aspect of colonial rule in the princely states of India. Although the British usually asserted that the native rulers enjoyed internal sovereignty, the line between giving advice and taking intervention was not fixed. If there was a threat to revenue, security or communications, the British officials could say that intervention was necessary in order to keep the treaty relationship. Rudolph and Rudolph (1966) refer to this more general pattern in Rajputana as a breakdown of pure indirect rule since political supervision kept on entering the domestic sphere.

Fiscal and revenue transformation

Fiscal relations played a central role in the process of colonial domination. Tribute gave the British a direct financial stake in the state's condition, while customs and transit duties had an impact on both state revenue and imperial communications. The 1823 agreement thus connected political subordination with fiscal discipline. In the case of Sirohi, when it did not have enough resources to keep order, British help could also take the form of loans and arrangements based on customs revenue. This was not colonial taxation on the same lines as that in British India, but it was an important means of creating fiscal dependence.



In the nineteenth century the administration of revenue became increasingly regularised. In order to fulfil its obligations and to keep internal order the state had to have sufficient administrative capacity. The British did not always want to completely replace the native fiscal system; instead their aim was to make it predictable so as to ensure the collection of tribute, trade and political security. This point is important. The administrative change that took place in Sirohi was one involving supervision, standardisation and some form of intervention rather than a complete substitution of bureaucrats.

Mount Abu and the territorial dimension of colonial power

Mount Abu was particularly important since the geographical situation led the British to have both a strategic and administrative interest in Sirohi. It became a significant centre for British officials and served as a summer headquarters for the Agent to the Governor-General in Rajputana. The British occupation and use of various parts of Abu began in the 1840s, with the setting up of a sanitarium. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Abu had turned into a major point of contact between the colonial administration and the princely states of Rajputana.

The history of Mount Abu shows that colonial influence was also territorial in character. Although the British were able to keep Sirohi as a princely state they at the same time gained practical control of strategically important areas. As a result there emerged a complex geographical distribution of power in which the ruler still held the formal authority over the state while a significant part of that political territory came to be closely associated with British administrative and military concerns.

Sirohi and the Revolt of 1857

The situation in 1857 showed how valuable Sirohi's connection with the British was. The revolt at Erinpura and the troubles near Mount Abu led to a serious security issue. The ruler of Sirohi helped the British to keep communications going and to maintain order. Correspondence relating to the Mutiny at Abu and Erinpura is also kept in the British archival records. As a result of his cooperation, the ruler was given favourable treatment, which included the reduction of part of the tribute. Looking administratively, the year 1857 reinforced the basis of cooperation between the princely state and the colonial government. The British could count on their rulers to act as faithful local authorities when crises occurred, and in turn the rulers could make use of British support to strengthen their own standing. The relationship was thus mutually beneficial yet structurally unequal.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONALISATION IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Following the consolidation of British control after 1857, the relationship between the colonial government and the princely states became more and more institutionalised. Although Sirohi continued to be a princely state, its ruler functioned within the administrative structure of the Rajputana political system. The state's communication with the British authorities, the submission of annual administrative reports, the fulfilment of its financial duties and the presence of political oversight made it increasingly understandable to the colonial bureaucracy.

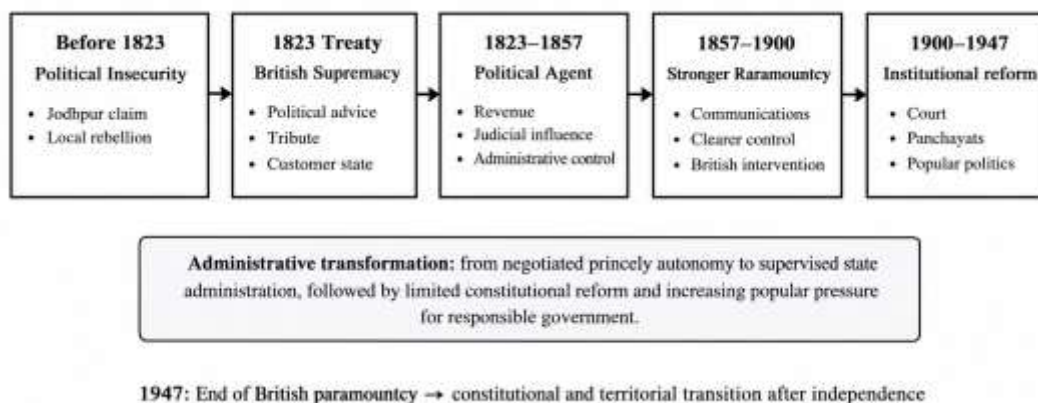
The fact that British India and princely India should not be seen as entirely separate must be remembered. As Roy (2020) points out, the princely states held a special place in the colonial economy and political structure since they were not directly annexed but their policy decisions were influenced by the overall imperial system. In the case of Sirohi, it was possible for administrative modernisation to take place without any loss of princely authority.

Early twentieth-century changes: from personal rule to institutional administration

In the twentieth century there was a more noticeable change from a system of administration centred on the ruler to one based on institutions. For instance, the archival records kept by Sirohi for the year 1940 contain a file on the limitation of the ruler's powers and the establishment of an Executive Council of which the Maharao was president and the Chief Minister vice-president. Further evidence shows that a High Court was set up in 1940, an advisory body was created in 1941 and village panchayats were introduced. Although these reforms did not result in a democratic form of government, they do show a significant change in the way state power was organised.

The expansion of councils and judicial bodies was also in keeping with a broader trend in princely India during the twentieth century. British officials gradually came to expect that the rulers should show 'good administration', and at the same time educated citizens became more and more demanding of their rights and of representation. Thus the language of administrative efficiency could have two different applications: it could be employed to justify the continuation of colonial supervision and it could also be put to use by political organisations in their demands for an accountable government.

Figure 1. Stages of Colonial Penetration and Administrative Transformation in Sirohi, 1823–1947



Source: Based on Aitchison (1909), *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908), British Library archival records, and modern scholarship.

Political awakening and the Praja Mandal movement

It cannot be fully understood by looking at the official institutions alone. By the 1930s political mobilisation in Sirohi was beginning to challenge the authority of the princely state. The Sirohi Praja Mandal came about as part of the broader struggle for responsible government in the princely states. Its activities were linked to the Indian National Congress's

changing policy towards the states following the Haripura session in 1938. Local activists called for civil liberties, administrative reform and greater involvement in government. The importance of the 1939 agitation lies in the fact that it revealed the shortcomings of the previous administrative system. The issue was no longer merely whether the ruler could administer the state efficiently; it became whether the people of the state should have a formally recognised role in administration. Studies conducted in Sirohi indicate that growing political activism tended to bring local grievances, demands for administrative reform and nationalist ideas together. The fact that administrative modernisation was entirely imposed from above is therefore also complicated. Although bodies such as councils, courts and panchayats were introduced or extended under the influence of the princes and the colonial authorities, political activists gave them a new meaning by calling for accountability. Administrative change was thus the result of interaction between the rulers, the colonial officials and society.

Administrative reform and political control in the 1940s

The 1940s were a period of transition. Although Sirohi's administration had a greater number of formal institutions, political authority still stayed closely tied to the ruler and the colonial political system. It is shown in the Executive Council files from 1940 that the powers of the ruler were being reviewed and redistributed among the various parts of the state apparatus. These changes indicate an effort to give the government a more institutional character while at the same time retaining the princely structure. Meanwhile, the political situation was undergoing rapid change. Because of the Second World War, the rise of people's movements in the States, and the decline in British authority after 1945, it became more and more difficult to maintain the traditional system of paramountcy. The administrative system which had developed under colonial conditions thus reached the stage of its final phase at the same time as the political basis of the Raj was collapsing.

1947 and the end of the colonial relationship

The gain of Indian independence in 1947 completely changed the legal and political situation in Sirohi. Once the British paramountcy had determined the state's external and internal political stance for over a century, it could no longer go on after the British had left. The period in Sirohi immediately after 1947 was part of the process by which the princely states were integrated into the Indian Union, although it is necessary to realise that this was the result of the administrative and political changes previously described. 1947 must be seen as marking not only an end but also as a period of transition; while it brought to a close the British system of paramountcy it did not at once eliminate the administrative institutions, the territorial issues and the political expectations which had arisen under that system. The subsequent incorporation of Sirohi into Rajasthan was influenced by these inherited structures and by the demands of local political opinion.

Table 2. Major Phases of Administrative Transformation in Sirohi

Period	Political framework	Administrative characteristics	Historical significance
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Before 1823	Weak princely authority	Factionalism, local rebellions, external pressure	Created conditions for British protection
1823–1857	Treaty-based paramountcy	Political Agent, tribute, advice, security intervention	Formalised British supremacy without annexation
1857–1900	Consolidated paramountcy	Fiscal oversight, reporting, territorial and strategic interests	Deepened administrative dependence
1900–1938	Institutionalising princely administration	Judicial and administrative reform, expanding bureaucratic practices	Shift from personal rule toward institutions
1939–1947	Political transition	Executive/advisory bodies, panchayats, popular mobilisation	Responsible government became a central political issue

7. NATURE OF COLONIAL PENETRATION IN SIROHI

The Sirohi case shows that colonial influence was multi-faceted since it covered diplomacy, finance, territory, administration, security and political legitimacy; the British did not have to get rid of the Sirohi dynasty in order to exert a great deal of influence, but rather set up a system in which the ruler's status was based on the protection and acknowledgment of the dominant power. Sirohi was not merely a passive target of colonial policy. The ruler made use of British protection in order to guard the state both from outside threats and from internal rivals. The officials settled the actual limits of intervention. The local elites either defended or questioned their own privileges. Merchants and other groups brought up issues concerning fiscal practices. Afterwards, political activists called for civil liberties and responsible government. The colonial administration was thus a process that involved negotiation and controversy. 'Administrative transformation' is therefore more useful than 'administrative replacement'. The British changed the framework in which Sirohi's native institutions functioned by making external relations depend on the colonial state, connecting fiscal responsibilities with political authority, promoting regular reporting and institutional administration, and creating strategic areas of direct British importance. In the twentieth century, these changes came into interaction with new expectations regarding rights and representation.



8. RESEARCH GAP

There has been a great deal of scholarly work on princely India which has made significant contributions to our understanding of British paramountcy, indirect rule, political development and the economic history of the princely states. Yet Sirohi is still comparatively little discussed in general studies of colonial administration. Much of the existing literature focuses on the political relations with the British, on particular rulers, the treaty of 1823, or on specific events such as 1857. Fewer studies have looked into the long-term administrative history linking the 1823 treaty with the institutional reforms of the twentieth century. Another area of concern is the relationship between colonial supervision and local initiative. The administrative changes in Sirohi cannot be understood solely in terms of British policy or merely as a result of reforms carried out by the princes. Influences in this process came from the rulers, the Political Agents, the jagirdars, the officials, the merchants, the tribal communities and the political organisations. The shift from a system of ruler-centred authority to one calling for responsible government also needs to be examined more closely. The paper fills these gaps by considering the period from 1823 to 1947 as one of continuous transformation. Rather than viewing colonialism as a straightforward progression from independence to domination, it looks at the different institutions through which power was exercised and also links the history of the formal administration with the rise of popular political demands.

9. CONCLUSION

The colonial influence changed Sirohi without, however, wiping out its princely status. The Treaty of 1823 set out the main features of this change by linking British protection with political subordination. Although the state kept its ruler and a great deal of its internal institutional setup, the ruler's freedom to act was limited by British supremacy, political advice, financial obligations and constraints on external relations. In the nineteenth century the relationship grew stronger and became more formalised. Political oversight, the organisation of revenue, security provisions, administrative reporting and British strategic interests—particularly at Mount Abu—caused the state to become ever more closely integrated with the wider imperial system, while the events of 1857 showed once again the advantages of cooperation between the princely state and the colonial government. In the twentieth century administrative reform led to the establishment of councils, judicial bodies, advisory bodies and institutions at the village level. However, along with these reforms new expectations were formed among the educated class. By the late 1930s the Praja Mandal movement was calling for civil liberties and responsible government. This marked a significant shift in the meaning of administration since the question was no longer merely one of how efficiently the ruler governed but rather became one of who had the right to take part in government.

The period in Sirohi from 1823 to 1947 therefore shows the complicated nature of indirect rule. Instead of simply replacing them, the British exercised their power via the existing political institutions. This led to a multi-layered system of administration in which colonial authority; the sovereignty of the princes and local political action constantly interacted. By



1947 the state of Sirohi had been greatly altered as a result of this process; the end of British paramountcy made it possible for a new stage of political integration to begin, but the institutions and political expectations that had been developed during the colonial period remained as important inheritances in the modern history of Sirohi.

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