

INTRODUCTION

*Tod evidently knew so much at first hand; he read everything bearing on his subject that he could come across, and he wrote it all down with such honesty of purpose and in so entertaining a style that he produced a classic: and classics are apt to be dangerous things ...*¹

“His Highness Arvind Singh Mewar would be very grateful if you could telephone him as soon as possible ...” A messenger from the calling booth near my apartment in Jaipur delivered the fax on a hot afternoon in late March. I had met Shri Arvind Singh two weeks earlier at one of his hotels in Bikaner. He had graciously made time for a private meeting to discuss my work on James Tod and invited me to lunch with a Brazilian polo player he was recruiting for his team, his English media consultant and his daughter—a daunting crowd, and not the company in which I typically find myself.

Because he was the “Mahārāṇā,” were such titles still possible, I wanted to learn what he knew of Tod. He had a reputation for being well disposed towards scholars, and I harbored the hope that he might have a cache of materials in his possession, or at least family lore that would be of use to me. There was no archive, but he was friendly, interested, and very supportive of my work.

I went quickly to return his call and found that he had a task for me. His trust, the Maharana Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF) every year gives out a series of awards to individuals who exemplify the ideals that the foundation was instituted to support. There are awards for social service, scholarship, art, and economic initiative, and they traditionally had been given to local residents and all-India national figures for their role in improving the quality of life in the Mewar (Udaipur) area. Each award is named after a figure in the history of Mewar who typifies the value being lauded, and consists of a plaque or trophy, a shawl and varying amounts of cash, depending on the prestige of the award.

¹ R. C. Temple (1921).

In that year (1997), a new award was instituted: the Lt.-Col. James Tod Award. This award, the first to be designated for a foreign national, was to be given annually to a person “who, like Colonel Tod, has produced a work of permanent value, and has contributed through his works an understanding of the spirit and values of Mewar.”² My task was to write the biography of Tod that would appear in the English version of the awards ceremony program. The Mahārāṇā invited me to come to Udaipur for the next morning, all expenses paid. Seizing the opportunity for a break from the routine, my wife and I packed our bags, and headed for the airport at dawn.

For the next three days, my laptop and I sat in a well air-conditioned room in a hotel that had once been the royal, palatial guest quarters, but now featured poolside dining to wealthy foreigners. Such a world, of course, was unimaginable in Tod’s day, as heat, bugs and disease were the inescapable companions of the Europeans in early nineteenth century India. The irony was rich, however, in that I, who had gone to India to trace Tod’s footsteps, was now practically standing in his shoes. As Tod once constructed the history of this place, I was now constructing Tod in this place. In a curious way, I was Tod.

There are, of course, many reasons why an analogy between my position and Tod’s would fail. I was not an imperial agent, and I had neither an armed force nor the fiscal resources of one of the greatest empires on earth behind me. I wasn’t there to bring order, or enforce a treaty. The power relation, in truth, was exactly reversed, as Shri Arvind Singh clearly had the upper hand on almost every measure. I was, however, writing history *there*. Just as Tod constructed the Rājput past there, so did I. At base, this is the point. This book is about construction—the construction of history, the construction of identity, and the construction of the identity of the architects of this history. Serving as Tod’s official English-language biographer for the modern court of Udaipur³ provided a fascinating anecdote with which to amuse friends and family, but it also provided insight into the forces at play in constructing a history *in vitro*.

In the end, I was asked to produce two pieces: one on Tod, and one on Mahārāṇā Udai Singh (1534–72 AD), the founder of Udaipur, in

² MMCF Program booklet (1997).

³ A Hindi version had already been written, in which Tod is claimed, through karma and rebirth, as a Rājput—notions that Arvind Singh astutely noted may not have been appropriate for the wider, English-speaking audience.