

The Princely States in India: The Lesser Known Story of Their Integration

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Abstract

When India attained independence from the British colonial rule, 562 princely states existed with their respective ruling princes and families. At that time, they were given a choice to either join India or Pakistan or stay independent; India is a united country today. What was it that made the princes accede to India when they could have been independent sovereign kings? This research paper looks into the first attempt at the integration of the princely states of India, the task completed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel eventually.

Keywords — princely states, integration, colonial rule, viceroy, federation, paramountcy, world war II

I. INTRODUCTION

It was the Revolt of 1857, wherein the States helped the British suppress the rebellion, that made the British realise their value. Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858, "We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions..." stopped the policy of the annexation of States into British territory and was followed by Lord Canning's despatch of 30 April 1860 attempting to compensate for the Doctrine of Lapse, "The integrity of the states should be preserved ... [the princes'] power to adopt heirs should be recognised." Soon, the Political Department was also set up under the direct charge of the Governor-General to regulate the interaction between the States and the Crown.

II. THE CRACKS IN PEACE

All seemed peaceful until the Crown started asserting its rights and prerogatives upon the States. In 1884, a letter addressed to the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces stated that "succession to a native state is invalid until it receives in some form the sanction of the British Authority." According to V. P. Menon, "The ruler thus did not inherit his gaddi as of right, but as a gift from the paramount power."

While the friction between the paramountcy and the States grew, it was in 1928 that a solution to the chaos was presented by the Motilal Nehru Committee - the offer to join the Indian federation - before the states with an assurance to "heartily welcome their decision." At this point the rulers of the Princely states

were divided into two factions – the 'federationists' led by the Maharajah of Bikaner and the Nawab of Bengal, and another group led by the Maharajah of Patiala, who espoused the idea of an 'Indian India' as a necessary requirement for association with British India.

III. THE IDEA OF A FEDERATION

The Federal Structure Sub Committee was soon constituted to particularly look into the matter of creation of a federation of Indian States; it stated in its report of 15 January 1931 that the States and provinces were to be united in a federation and advocated for certain agreed safeguards for a transition period. Throughout the year deliberations went on regarding this matter, and the dignitaries stated their stand at the Second Round Table Conference in September 1931.

Gandhiji, who dominated the Conference majorly, was opposed to dyarchy at the centre and claimed complete control over India for a fully responsible government. The British did not agree to this demand. British PM Ramsay announced at the end of the Conference, "the great idea of an All-India Federation still holds the field. The principle of a responsible federal government subject to certain responsibilities and safeguards through a transition period, remain unchanged." This event also led to a change of heart among many Princely rulers. The Committee had left no hope for rulers to gain financially by joining the federation. Thus, the rulers turned apprehensive about joining the federation.

IV. GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ACT 1935 ONWARD

The British Parliament passed the Government of India Act in 1935 establishing a constitutional relationship between Indian States and British India on a federal basis and accession to the federation voluntary for the Princely States; efforts to convince the States continued under Viceroy Linlithgow, who sent out emissaries to convince the rulers to join the federation. According to V. P. Menon, "The question that agitated [the rulers] was not whether the federation would enable them to contribute to the benefit of India as a whole, but whether their own

position would be better and safer inside the federation than outside it.”

The rulers kept prolonging the demands for concessions while the Political Department tried its best to pacify them. It was in January 1939 that the Viceroy gave the final offer to the rulers in the form of a circular letter enclosing revised drafts of the general clauses of the instrument of accession. The offer included no prospect of variation and a 6-month deadline to respond on the matter. The rulers found the proposal “fundamentally unsatisfactory”. Meanwhile, following the elections that took place in the provinces, the people in the Princely States began to agitate for civil liberties as well and thus, on 3 December 1938, Gandhiji claimed that the awakening in States was due to ‘time spirit’ and declared that there was no solution but complete independence. He also warned the British and the Princely States that Congress policy of non-intervention may be abandoned to help the people.

Before any outcome could be reached, the 2nd World war broke out in 1939, and the British decided they needed the help of the Indians, thus letting go of the proposition for the formation of a federation. On 11 September 1939, Lord Linlithgow announced in his address to both the Houses of the Central Legislature, “The compulsion of the present international situation ... we have no choice but to hold in suspense the work in connexion with preparations for federation.”

V. CONCLUSION

These efforts, though abruptly stopped in 1939, deemed useful for the political leaders in India in the successive years. In the past years of deliberations, the British had indirectly started the process of integration of States for the Congress to continue in the following years. The difference only lied in the main aims – the British wanted the Crown on top, whereas Congress wanted complete independence.

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