

Monarchies in Transition

CDDRL Workshop, Stanford University
June 5-6, 2008

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Introduction

In contemporary India, despite its myriad shortcomings, democracy is the only game in town.ⁱ Popular as well as scholarly accounts have often attributed the origins of India's democracy to British colonial tutelage.ⁱⁱ Yet such accounts fail to explain why few other British colonies made successful transitions to democracy. Consequently, the British colonial legacy alone can hardly constitute a sufficient explanation for India's democratic dispensation.

Furthermore, no account of India's transition to democracy in the aftermath of nearly a hundred years of colonial rule discusses the how Indian nationalists successfully managed to meld some 600 odd "princely states" into the modern, Indian democratic state.ⁱⁱⁱ The rulers of the vast majority of these had been autocrats of one variant or other. Many of them were quite dissolute and matched the caricature of Oriental despots. A small handful of them were benevolent rulers and evinced some concern for the welfare of their subjects. However, none of them ruled as constitutional monarchs and had had no schemes for popular representation. In terms of sovereignty, they had been nominally independent but had recognized the British as the "paramount" power in India. Under the terms of this agreement, the rulers of these states retained substantial administrative powers but ceded three critical areas: defense, foreign affairs and communications to the British Indian Empire.^{iv}

The largely peaceful, and entirely successful effort in integrating these states into the Indian state constitutes an intriguing puzzle. Many of the "princely states" were of sufficient size and economic development that they could have survived as independent, self-governing entities. More to the point, well into the late 1940s a number of key British colonial administrators, acutely hostile toward Indian nationalists, had encouraged many of them to try and remain outside the ambit of the emergent Indian state. Despite these important hurdles, India's nationalist leaders through an amalgam of cajolery, persuasion, and a modicum of coercion, managed to convince the rulers to cede power and merge their dominions into the nascent Indian polity.^v

At the time of independence and the partition of the British Indian Empire into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan, Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, in the wake of complex and torturous negotiations, decreed that the "princely states" had one of two possible choices: they could join either India or Pakistan.^{vi} Despite the preferences and entreaties of some of his advisers he ruled out the possibility of independence. Furthermore, he also decreed that the principles of geographic contiguity and demographic composition, would constrain their choices.^{vii} This set of binary choices had come as an unpleasant surprise to many of the monarchs who had entertained hopes of independence or creating a union of states of their own. While the vast majority of the rulers accepted the inevitable and chose to accede to either India or Pakistan, a small handful of them proved to be quite recalcitrant and ignored the writing on the wall ultimately to their own peril.

Ensuring Accession

The task before the Indian nationalists was clear-cut. They had to not only ensure that the vast majority of the “princely states” acceded to India but that their rulers also proved willing to relinquish their powers to the new Central (national) government and accept the terms of a democratic constitution that was yet to be drafted. The task before them was nothing short of monumental. How was this process undertaken and accomplished? It was mostly brought about through a careful negotiations and when they failed, in two cases through the use of military force. The initial terms that were offered to the monarchs were quite generous: they were only asked to hand over control in regard to defense, foreign affairs and communications.^{viii} However, within three years, following the drafting of independent India’s constitution in 1950, with the exception of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which acceded to India under exceptional and exigent circumstances, the constitutional provisions were extended to all the former princely states and their territories merged into the former states of British India.^{ix}

What explains then the willingness of the monarchs to cede power and accede to either India or Pakistan? Predominantly Muslim states which were within the boundaries of Pakistan, of course, had a relatively easy decision to make. Neither their rulers nor their subjects would have chosen to throw in their lot with India given the sharp ethno-religious polarization and horrific violence that had accompanied the partition of India.^x

The monarchs who chose to accede to India did so because of two compelling reasons. First, they decided that they had few viable alternatives. Despite the predilections of *individual* British administrators, British *policy* was not fashioned to enable them to retain any semblance of independence. Second, they also recognized that failing to accede to India might leave them open to the possibility of domestic insurrections. Indeed with the lapse of colonial authority this is precisely what Maharaja Hari Singh, a Hindu monarch of the predominantly Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir came to confront when he dithered on the question of accession.

Two individuals deserve the bulk of the credit for persuading (and occasionally browbeating) the monarchs to accede to the new Union of India. They were the Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel and his able assistant, V.P. Menon, the Secretary of the newly created States Department. These two individuals tirelessly and deftly negotiated with the monarchs and succeeded in obtaining their accession and subsequently integration into India.

What factors facilitated them in their endeavors? Obviously, there is no gainsaying the intelligence, drive and commitment of these two individuals. Beyond these personal attributes, important structural factors facilitated their efforts. First and foremost, they had the full support of the vast structure and organization of the Indian National Congress, the principal, nationalist political party that had spearheaded the drive for India’s independence. More to the point, the Congress commanded widespread support amongst the vast majority of India’s population including significant segments of the

Muslims, the largest minority community. Consequently, both Patel and Menon could draw upon a wellspring of popular legitimacy when dealing with autocratic rulers bent upon retaining their anachronistic power and privileges. Second, they also relied on the existence of a series of *praja mandals* (“people’s societies”) within the vast majority of the “princely states”. These entities were outposts of the Indian National Congress under the aegis of the All-India People’s Conference and they could mobilize their members against the monarchs if they refused to cede authority to the emergent Indian state.^{xi} In fact, in one or two cases, the threat of popular mobilization was used against recalcitrant rulers with considerable effect. Third, India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, along with Patel and Menon, held out the possibility of the monarchs playing a role in the Constituent Assembly, which was to be soon convened to draft independent India’s constitution. However, they could only take part in that process if they had acceded to India. Fourth and finally, both Patel and Menon made important symbolic and substantive concessions to the rulers. At a symbolic level, they allowed the monarchs to maintain their titles and their frippery. At a more substantive level, they carefully negotiated a set of “privy purses” for the monarchs. These amounted to annual payments from the Indian exchequer in perpetuity to the monarchs.^{xii} The size of these payments was calibrated to the revenue that the particular states had generated. A combination of all four factors played a vital role in ensuring the smooth transition of these monarchies into the constitutional structure of the modern Indian state.

Politics After Accession

It is interesting to note that the monarchs initially acceded to the emergent Indian state that with the understanding that they were transferring the powers of defense, foreign affairs and communications to the new national government. However, in the course of the drafting of the constitution, all the residuary powers of the monarchs were stripped away with their consent and their states merged into re-organized provinces. Their individual military units, in turn, were merged into the new Indian national army. Similarly, their administrative structures were folded into those of the state into which they were merged. Finally, the populace of each of these “prince states” was granted representation in existing legislatures. These legislative bodies, in turn, were expanded in proportion to the population that had been added to the existing state as a consequence of the merger of one or more “princely states”.

What is quite remarkable is that almost all of these administrative changes were brought about with little or no violence involved. Two anomalous cases, however, do merit some discussions. The first case involves the southern “princely state” of Hyderabad. In this case, the Muslim ruler of the state, the the Nizam of Hyderabad, initially harbored visions of independence and subsequently an impractical merger with Pakistan, did the Indian state resort to force when all attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with the Nizam had failed. However, once the “police action” was completed, the subsequent merger of the state proceeded without any difficulty.

Apart from Hyderabad, the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir became an important source of contention. The situation in Kashmir was the obverse of Hyderabad.

Kashmir had an unpopular Hindu monarch and a predominantly Muslim population. However, unlike Hyderabad, it shared borders with both India and Pakistan.^{xiii} In the event, the monarch, Maharaja Hari Singh, had chosen not to accede to either India or Pakistan despite repeated entreaties from Lord Mountbatten. As a Hindu monarch who had shown scant regard for the welfare of his Muslim subjects he was understandably reluctant to join a state which was being created as a “homeland” for the Muslims of South Asia. He was also loath to join India because he knew that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru would invariably induce him to undertake drastic land reforms.^{xiv}

However, when faced with a tribal rebellion, which was swiftly won Pakistani military support, he acceded to India.^{xv} To the credit of the government of India, it expressed a willingness to come to the maharaja’s aid only *after* it had sought and ascertained the views of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, the leader of the largest popular and secular organization within the state, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference and following the maharaja’s signature to the Instrument of Accession.^{xvi} These two steps were taken to ensure both the *legitimacy* and *legality* of the accession. In the aftermath of Kashmir accession, however, the Indian state while firmly committed to the creation, nurturing and sustenance of democratic institutions on a nationwide basis chose to engage in various forms of political chicanery and tolerated widespread political abuses within the portion of the state that it came to control.^{xvii} Ironically, the Indian state participated in the stultification of democratic institutions within the state to demonstrate that a Muslim-majority state could thrive under the aegis of a secular, democratic polity thereby challenging the Muslim League’s contention that Hindus and Muslims constituted two, distinct primordial nations.

Conclusion

Apart from the Indian state’s many malfeasances in the state of Jammu and Kashmir it has managed to successfully entrench democratic norms and institutions across India. Some of the rulers of the princely states and their descendants, including Karan Singh, the son of Maharaja Hari Singh, chose to enter the democratic political fray. Others grudgingly came to accept their vastly diminished status and silently accepted their fate.^{xviii}

What are the central propositions then that can be gleaned from the successful merger of these monarchical states into the Indian Union? Two of them immediately suggest themselves. First, they demonstrate the capacity of a powerful democratic nationalist movement to ably fold in vast autocratic realms into a working democratic polity. In this context, the contrast with Pakistan, could not be more vivid. Those monarchs who chose or were compelled to join Pakistan also lost their formal privileges. However, the autocratic norms and attitudes that had pervaded their realms remained largely unchallenged because of the inability of the Pakistani nationalist movement to forge a democratic polity.^{xix}

Second, it also demonstrates that extraordinary administrative capacity of the nascent Indian state in amalgamating the existing institutional structures of a bewildering variety

of states into the structures of the provinces of the former British Indian states. The first generation of Indian nationalist leaders proved remarkably adept in knitting together the patchwork of state structures that they had inherited from the “princely states” and managed to successfully debunk the dire prognostications of many scholars and analysts who had predicted that faced with the cleavages of class, region, language and religion the Indian state faced the distinct possibility of disintegration.^{xx}

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond and Mark Plattner, eds. *The State of India's Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); also see Atul Kohli, ed. *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Myron Weiner and Samuel Huntington, *Understanding Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1987).

ⁱⁱⁱ A partial exception is Ramachandra Guha's monumental work, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008)

^{iv} Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

^v V.P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian State* (Madras: Orient Longman, 1956)

^{vi} The state of Pakistan was created because Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan had convinced substantial numbers of Indian Muslims that their rights would not be protected in a predominantly Hindu polity following the departure of the British. For an analysis of Jinnah's strategy see Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); it can also be argued that the Indian National Congress failed to adequately reassure substantial numbers of Muslims within British India that their rights would be guaranteed in an independent, secular India. For a discussion see Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

^{vii} The question of demographic composition requires some clarification. Owing to the demand for and the ultimate creation of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland, predominantly Muslim states would have to accede to Pakistan especially if they were situated within the boundaries of or contiguous to the emergent Pakistani state. On this subject see Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (New York: Dutton, 1953 [c1951]).

^{viii} Ibid. Ramusack, 2004, p.273.

^{ix} Given that Kashmir acceded to India in the midst of a civil war compounded by a Pakistani invasion there is much polemical literature on the subject. For a dispassionate discussion see H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain, India, Pakistan* (London: Hutchinson, 1969).

^x On this subject see the succinct discussion in Radha Kumar, “The Troubled History of Partition,” *Foreign Affairs* Volume 76, Number 1 (January/February 1997).

^{xi} Ibid. Guha, 2008, p.39.

^{xii} These “privy purses” were abolished in 1971 through a constitutional amendment under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as part of her putative commitment to the pursuit of a socialist society. On this subject see the discussion in Granville Austin, *Working a*

Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000)

^{xiii} There is considerable controversy about how the borders of the state were drawn during the process of partition. For a careful assessment of the evidence see Shereen Ilahi, "The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Fate of Kashmir," *India Review* Volume 2, Number 1 (January 2003), pp. 77-102.

^{xiv} Sumit Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

^{xv} On the question of Pakistani involvement in support of the rebels see Major-General Akbar Khan, *Raiders in Kashmir* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1975); also see discussion in Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2006).

^{xvi} The rebels and their Pakistani supporters managed to seize a third of the state before Indian forces were flown in and stopped their advance. For a discussion see Lionel Protip Sen, *Slender Was the Thread: Kashmir Confrontation, 1947-48* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1979).

^{xvii} For an analysis of the complicity of the Indian state in stultifying the growth of democratic institutions in Jammu and Kashmir see Sumit Ganguly, "Explaining the Kashmir Crisis: Political Mobilization and Institutional Decay," *International Security* Volume 21, Number 2 (Autumn 1996), pp. 76-107.

^{xviii} *Ibid.* Copland, 1997.

^{xix} On this subject see Allen McGrath, *The Destruction of Pakistan's Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); also see Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1961).

^{xx} See, for example, Selig Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).