

Diversity Of Governance & India's Struggle For Integration

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ABSTRACT: Freedom for India had different connotations for different Indians. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 freed the country from the British yolk and gave birth to a new nation : Pakistan. Hence for many Indians the Act of 1947 represented freedom, independence, sovereignty. However the states of India that were governed by native rulers functioned under a different paradigm. The departure of the British created a conundrum of identity, governance, sovereignty for India's 600 odd Princely States. The present paper explores how these 600PrincelyStates were governed, what were the aspirations of the peoples therein and how a climate was created for the states to become integrated with the Indian Union.

Key Words: British India, Freedom Struggle, Integration, People's Movements, Princely States

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I. INTRODUCTION

The British conquest of India was piecemeal. Some Indian states were annexed outright through military conquests, others through the Doctrine of Lapse, still others on the pretext of maladministration while the majority of Indian Rajas signed the Subsidiary Alliance whereby a British Resident and a subsidiary force got stationed at the Court and the native prince paid a fixed sum to the British. Thereafter the Native ruler was free to rule his territory as he saw fit. As a consequence, there emerged, over a period of time, two Indias- the British India and the Princely India ie the India of the Princely States.

The departure of the British from India and the lapse of paramountcy should have had little significance for the 600 odd states where the de jure rulers were the Indian princesses. However the Indian Independence Act of 1947 had more than one facet to it. It heralded the birth of a new nation Pakistan, it marked the departure of the British from the Indian subcontinent and it paved the way for the birth of the Indian Union from the amalgamation of British India and the Princely India.

Objective

The aim of the present paper is to explore the nature of governance of Princely India and the causes that led to the joining of these states in the freedom movement in the British provinces.

II. THE PRINCELY STATES

The governance in Princely States was by no means uniform. There were some benevolent progressive monarchs but largely the Princely States were , 'just sinks of reaction and incompetence, mere cesspools of decay and stagnation. Illiteracy poverty, ignorance, ruled supreme.' Civil liberties were unheard of. Any suggestions for popular governments (which came repeatedly from the Viceroy after 1919) were turned a deaf ear to. The Princes spent extravagantly, lived lavishly, and ruled autocratically, undisturbed by the misery of the many who were their subjects. It came as a rude shock to most Indian Rajas when they were presented with the option of integrating either with the Indian Union or with Pakistan. Nizam Osman Ali of Hyderabad protested to the Viceroy at the way in which his state is being abandoned by its old ally, the British Government. Hamidullah Khan of Bhopal called the Instrument of Accession his 'death warrant.' Udaibhan Singh, the Maharaj –Rana of Dholpur signed and promptly burst into tears; another prince, so the story goes, had a heart attack after the signing ceremony.[1]

The people in the Princely states lived in an illusion of being ruled by Indian Rajas, largely unaware of the true slavery to the British. The remarkable upsurge of nationalism which gripped British India left them almost cold. An abject apathy born out of poverty and ignorance held them in trance. What did stir them however were the local causes, living conditions that stood out in contrast to British India. Some of the important Princely States were:

2.1 The State of Travancore:

Before integration with the Indian Union, Travancore was ruled by Varma kings. In the year 1795, Karthikai Thurnal Ram Varma signed the Perpetual Alliance and then in 1805 the Subsidiary Alliance with the British. Nevertheless Travancore was a progressive state and great emphasis was laid on education, particularly female education. Travancore also industrialized itself, leading to economic prosperity of the people. The liberal attitude of the rulers also led to the formation of Legislative Council in 1925. This notwithstanding, Travancore practised some time honoured traditions that were distasteful to its people. An outcry against these led to the joining of Travancore in the mainstream Freedom Movement viz :

As a matter of State Policy, Travancore appointed only Kannad or Tamil Brahmins to administrative posts. Brahmins from outside the state were invited for appointments which gradually led to resentment amongst the resident population both against them as against the Raja. A petition called 'Malayali Memorial' was signed by about 10000 people of all castes and creeds and presented to the Rajah. This fell on deaf ears but, "the vigorous public campaign which followed symbolized the beginning of modern political movement in the state"[2]

Similarly, the Ezhava Memorial of 1896 was the articulation of the demand for social justice in the caste en Travancore society .More importantly, the agitators found an echo of their demands in the Gandhian principle of eradication of untouchability. This paved the way for integration of the people's movement in Travancore with the national movement outside.

Thus, in Travancore it was the struggle of middle class people for equal opportunities in employment, the agitation of the minorities and the lower castes for social equality and finally the people's struggle for responsible governments

2.2 The State of Hyderabad:

Unlike Travancore, the integration of Hyderabad to the Indian Union was turbulent and beset with hurdles. In 1918, 'His Exalted Highness' Nizam Usman Ali Khan Bahadur was granted the title of 'Faithful Ally of the British Government' by a personally autographed letter from the King. Loyalty notwithstanding, the Nizam in 1925 wrote to the Viceroy that, 'save and except matters relating to foreign powers and policies, the Nizams of Hyderabad have been independent in the internal affairs of their State just as much as the British Government in British India'. The claim was comprehensively repudiated. In no uncertain terms the Viceroy Lord Reading declared that there was no equality between the governments of Hyderabad and Great Britain and asserted that, 'it was the right of the British Government to intervene in the internal affairs of Indian States.'

The Internal affairs of Hyderabad were thus:85 % of the population was Hindu which was primarily engaged in agrarian pursuits. Civil services, the police, and the army were the close preserve of the Muslims. But to give due credit, the Nizams followed a liberal religious policy and communal harmony prevailed in the state. Religious harmony notwithstanding, since government posts were reserved for the Muslims, there were large scale conversions to Islam. Another cause for resentment amongst the Hindus was the practice of inviting North Indian Muslims to settle down in Hyderabad.

Also the lot of Hindus who were largely involved in agriculture was challenging . Some parts such as Telangana region experienced the most atrocious form of feudal exploitation.[3] Begar or the practice of free labor was widely prevalent and the merchants were made to give supplies either free or at nominal rate to Government officials. Usury, use of force and harassment of women and subservience were some other ills that prevailed[4]. In 1921 the Andhra Jansangh was created for, 'convening public meetings and other allied activities to bring about progress of the Andhras.'[5] Arya Samaj also became active in Telangana leading the fight against discrimination.

In 1938, started the first agitation against the Nizam's regime and demand for constitutional reforms as in British India were put forth. The Muslim population would have kept aloof of these popular movements but for Khilafat Movement, that resonated in the heart of the Muslims and soon they were aroused to political assemblies for the sake of religion.

2.3 The State of Kashmir:

Born out of the Treaty of Amritsar, Kashmir has always been a polyglot, polytheistic entity with a resident population of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists. The Raja of Kashmir was Hindu and the minority Hindus presided over their Muslim brethren. The poverty of the Muslim masses is appalling. Dressed in rags and barefoot a Muslim peasant presents the appearance of a starving beggar. Almost the whole brunt of official corruption is borne by the Muslim masses and rural indebtedness is staggering.[6] System of begar was rampant. Education was scant and dignity of the populace unheard of. The people of Kashmir waged a long struggle for political reform under the leadership of Sheikh Abdulla. The ruler Maharaja Sir Hari Singh had followed the twin policy of repression and reforms. While some minor reforms were introduced, the people's movement had been ruthlessly suppressed. At the time of independence Sheikh Abdulla and his associates were

still in prison. So the Ruler continued to toy with the idea of an independent Kashmir. His dream was shattered with the Pak invasion of Kashmir. This forced him to sign the Instrument of Accession.

2.4 The State of Rajkot:

Another epic struggle took place in Rajkot, the state which was so intimately connected with the early life of Gandhiji. The struggle was made memorable by the participation of such stalwarts as Gandhiji, Kasturba, Patel and Mridula Sarabhai.

Rajkot was ably governed by Lakhraj till 1939. He was succeeded by his son Dharmendra Singhji who was a complete contrast to his father. Under his irresponsible regime people's movement broke out in the state of Rajkot. His extravagant lifestyle led to the rise in prices while his aristocratic ways incited people to demand for popular participation in government. There was a one day strike in 1936 to secure better working conditions at the state owned cotton mill. A protest against gambling followed which was followed by a complete hartal under Sardar Patel.

Under the pressure of the agitation the Ruler yielded to the demands for reforms. It was argued that a committee would be set up to prepare a scheme of reforms. Of the ten members of the Committee seven were to be nominated by Patel. But when the latter actually submitted his list, the minorities and sectarian interests in the State were instigated to start an agitation, demanding representation in the Committee. The Ruler now broke the arrangement. Against the breach of faith Gandhiji went on an indefinite fast. The dispute was ultimately referred to the Chief Justice of India, Sir Maurice Gwer. His verdict was in favour of Gandhiji. The struggle has a strange ending. In his hour of triumph, Gandhiji conceded defeat, saying that the victory was not obtained by change of heart of the Ruler but by coercion due to his fast.

III. IMPACT OF BRITISH INDIA

Such were the peasant uprisings, clashes between the people and the rulers which disturbed the placid waters of the state's politics from time to time. Some sort of awakening is noticeable and demands were being voiced for civil liberties and responsible governments. But in the early days, the voice was weak. It lacked conviction and character of a movement for emancipation. It was in 1927 that the First All India State's People's Conference was held that gave direction to these movements and the movement got real impetus after the Govt of India Act of 1935. For the Act had proposed a federation of British India and the Princely States. The Indian leaders of British India who had so far assiduously kept themselves away from state politics were quick to realise that they could no longer afford to do so. The Congress realised that the autocratic princes could block all political progress by acting as tools of British Imperialists in the proposed federal setup. Gandhi, Nehru, Sardar Patel, Phattabhi Sitaramayya and others gave a lead to the people which resulted in quickening of the pace of movement in the states. Praja Mandals sprang up everywhere. By 1938 the whole of Princely India was in ferment. Hyderabad, Mysore, and Travancore in the south, Kashmir and Jaipur in the North, Rajkot and Baroda in the west and the Orissa states of Dhenkanal, Talchar and Rampur in the East were convulsed by mass movements. The special features that distinguished this movement from the All India Freedom Movement were:

- i. It was a movement for civil liberties and responsible government and not as in British India for independence. For it was believed that once these were attained, the states would no longer save the imperialist interests of Britain.
- ii. Unlike in British India, the strategy followed had to differ from state to state. There could be no one single action embracing all the states simultaneously as was done in British India at the time of Non Cooperation or Civil Disobedience Movement.

The Princes were quick to sense the threat to their autocratic rule and retaliated with vigorous repression. They could foresee that all this movement would lead to wresting of actual power from their hands and so worked hard to crush it. The people of Travancore were subjected to prolonged repression because they wanted the introduction of responsible government in the state. The state had earned a reputation of good administration in the past but failed to rise to the occasion at this time. The state unit of the Congress was banned in 1934. After that the conflict grew steadily more and more severe with many police firings and deaths. Another state which earned notoriety for repression was Hyderabad. As in Travancore, in Hyderabad also the State unit was not allowed to function. This led to a Satyagraha in which hundreds were arrested. The people of Jaipur also came in conflict with their Ruler at about this time. There was a famine in central parts of the state. The State Praja Mandal tried to organize famine relief. The state administration scented grave danger in this innocent activity. A ban was put on Seth Jammalal Bajaj the president of Jaipur Praja Mandal on his entry in Jaipur State. Sethji defied these orders, was arrested and kept in detention for more than six months without any trial. There was a satyagraha in the state which attracted India-wide attention.

The situation in Orissa State was very bad. In Dhenkal and Talcher, the repression was so severe that about 30000 people fled their homes and took refuge in the adjoining province of Orissa. In Rampur State, the people's agitation took a violent turn and the British Political Agent Major Bazal was murdered. This served as

a pretext for the Paramount Power to intervene. Troops were brought in from all parts of India to overawe the peasantry. There was frightful repression and many people fled the state in terror. The Mysore State too saw a tremendous mass movement. The state had a reputation for good administration in the past. But with the rise in political consciousness among the masses, the state administration became panicky and a severe repression was let loose. An attempt was made to stop all political activity. Meetings were prohibited, securities were demanded and oral warnings were issued to political minded persons. This forced the State Unit of Congress to launch a satyagraha. The repression grew worse. In one incident alone 32 persons were killed and 48 others were injured as a result of police firing. The National Congress now decided to intervene. As a result of mediation of Sardar Patel and Acharya Kriplani, peace was restored. The State accepted many of the demands of the people which included the recognition of the State unit of the Congress and its representation in the Reforms Committee set up by the State. The Satyagraha was then called off.

The people's struggle for freedom in the states entered its final and most decisive phase with the advent of Independence. Before leaving India, the British gave the State the right to accede either India or Pakistan or even become independent. Many of the Princes wanted to adopt the third course. Travancore gave the lead. On 11 June 1947, the Dewan Sir CP Ramaswami Aiyer announced that Travancore had decided to become an independent sovereign state. Hyderabad followed suit. Kashmir and others were waiting, and watching the situation. This move of the Princes posed a serious threat to the unity of India. The people of the State took up the challenge. Intense agitators were demanding immediate accession of the State to India. In Travancore the popular feelings were roused to such an extent that a personal attack was made on Sir CP who was severely wounded. Next day the Maharaja announced his accession to India. This decided the waverers. By 15 Aug 1947, all the states except Kashmir and Hyderabad had signed the Instrument of Accession.

IV. FREEDOM FOR PRINCELY INDIA

On 15 Aug 1947, British India became free. But the people of the States were still in bondage. The Princes had acceded to India only on three subjects: Defence, External Affairs and Communications. In their internal administration they were still sovereign. So the fight for popular governments continued. Kathiawad once again gave lead. There was a wave of agitation. In the tiny state of Muli the agitators even took possession of all the government buildings. Dhrangadhra and Bhavnagar faced a similar threat. As a result of an agitation the administration of the Kutch State was taken over by the Govt of India. A similar fate overtook the Ruler of Faridkot in Punjab.

In Hyderabad the Nizam tried to become independent. This forced the Government to send Indian army to take over the State. Junagarh was a state contiguous to India and Pakistan. The people wanted the ruler to join India. But he decided to accede to Pakistan. The people under Shyamal das Gandhi rose in revolt. The Ruler fled to Pakistan and the Indian troops occupied the state.

V. CONCLUSION

Independence for India was marred by the partition. However the fear that after the departure of the British many of the Princely states would set themselves up as independent, leading to the Balkanization of the country was atleast arrested. Fear – favour, threat – coercion, patriotism and integrity, warred with each other, as the British Government, Indian National Congress, the peoples of the state and the princess prepared to sign the Instrument of Accession leading to the birth of Union of India.

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