

The States' People's Movement

British supremacy in India had been established through a long and complex process comprising direct conquest, intimidation or even accommodation of the pre-colonial Indian political entities. The result was direct British rule over three-fifths of the sub-continent, and indirect rule or 'Paramountcy' over the remaining two-fifths. The areas coming under the latter arrangement continued to be nominally ruled by Indian princes and comprised what was known as the Princely States or simply Indian States.

In this chapter, you will learn about the popular struggles in princely states that took place during the period 1920 to 1947. You will also learn about the policy of the Indian National Congress on the issue as well as the role of the communists in spearheading these struggles.

BRITISH RELATIONS WITH THE PRINCELY STATES

On the eve of British Conquest, there existed 562 Princely States, some as big as Hyderabad (as large as Italy) and some as tiny as Bilbari (with a population of 27). Like the East India Company, many Indian States too came into prominence in the later Mughal period, profiting from the decline of the central Mughal authority. States like Hyderabad and some Rajput states were not conquered by the English but accepted the Company's supremacy. Some states like the Rajput states of Central India had maintained their independence from the Mughals as well as the Marathas and were even saved from extinction by British intervention. Some states were created by the British in the process of overthrow of Maratha Confederacy.

The British relations with the Princely States were not constant and went through the following broad phases:

- 1740 to 1765- Struggle for Equality
- 1765 to 1813- Policy of Ring Fence
- 1813 to 1857- Policy of Subordinate Isolation
- 1857 to 1935- Policy of Subordinate Union
- 1935 to 1947- Policy of Equal Federation

1740 to 1765-Struggle for Equality

Prior to 1740, the English East India Company was merely a commercial body. The political ambitions of the Europeans are traced back to 1740, with the beginning of the Carnatic War, when Dupleix first started dabbling in Indian politics. In 1757, the English Company won the Battle of Plassey and emerged as the political force behind the Nawab of Bengal. In 1764, the Company won the Battle of Buxar and gained the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (treaty of Allahabad 1765). Thus, during the period 1740–65, the Company was still subordinate to Indian States and was striving for a status of equality with them.

1765 to 1813- Policy of Ring Fence

During this time, the Company followed the policy of creating buffer states around the Company's territory of Bengal and the defence of Awadh constituted the defence of Bengal at that time. Thus, Warren Hastings' wars against Mysore and the Marathas as well as Wellesley's formation of subsidiary alliances with the princely states were carried out under the policy of ring fence.

Under the **Subsidiary Alliance System**, also known as the '**Trojan Horse**' tactic in empire building, princely rulers were not allowed to have their independent armed force. They were to be protected by the East India Company but had to pay for the subsidiary forces that the Company maintained for such protection. If Indian rulers failed to make the payment, part of their territory was taken away as penalty. Though the Nawab of Awadh was the first to enter into such an alliance after the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the first victim of the policy of subsidiary alliance of Wellesley was the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1798.

1813 to 1857- Policy of Subordinate Isolation

Under **Lord Hastings** (1813–23), the subsidiary alliances formed were no longer on the basis of reciprocity and mutual amity, but impelled the Indian states to act in subordinate cooperation with the British government. Under Lord Hastings to 1857, the Resident officers of the Company were slowly transformed from diplomatic agents of a foreign power to controlling officers of a superior government. Instead of functioning as an ambassador, he often assumed the functions of a 'dictator'.

The policy of subordinate isolation gained further push after the **Charter Act of 1833**, which ordered the company to wind up its commercial business as soon as possible. With the prospect of declining income from trade, the Company's financial base began to shift from trade and commerce to land revenue, **from business of trade to business of government**. This naturally pushed the Company to go ahead with continuous territorial expansion. The Court of Directors ordered the Governor General to grasp every opportunity of just and honourable annexation. From this time onwards and until 1857, the Company's Governor Generals were frankly annexationists. Annexations were made on the plea of failure of heirs or misgovernance (Doctrine of Lapse).

Accordingly, William Bentinck annexed Mysore (1831), Cachar (1832), Coorg (1834) and Jaintia (1835). Lord Auckland annexed Karnal, Mandavi (1839), Kolaba and Jalaun (1840). And Lord Dalhousie annexed several Indian states including big states like Nagpur, Satara and Awadh.

1857 to 1935- Policy of Subordinate Union

The Queen's Proclamation of 1858 announced the abandonment of the policy of annexations. The Doctrine of Lapse was buried deep and the Indian states were given the assurance that the Crown desired "no extension of present territorial possessions". This change in policy was due to the loyal attitude shown by the ruling princes during the Revolt of 1857 which had amply demonstrated that the princes could be used as 'breakwaters of future possible storms in India'.

However, the immunity from annexations came at a great cost and lowering of status of the Indian princes. For under the company, the sanction of the Governor General was necessary only in case of failure of 'natural heirs'. But after 1858, the fiction of Mughal authority ended and the Crown emerged as the unquestioned **paramount power** in India. The Royal Titles Act of 1876 put the seal on this new relationship by proclaiming the Queen as Kaiser-i-Hind, i.e. the Queen Empress of India.

As such, all successions had to regularly seek the sanction of the Crown. The ruler now inherited the 'gaddi' not as a right, but as a gift from the Crown. Normally every ruler was installed on the gaddi by a British Agent and was granted possession of the state but not sovereignty. The continuation of his rule was conditional on his loyalty to the British Crown.

The Government of India retained the right to interfere in the internal matters of the Indian states and exercised this right on various occasions. For instance, in 1867, the Nawab of Tonk was asked to resign in favour of his son on charges of complicity in an attack on Thakur of Lawa. In 1875, the Gaekwad of Baroda was removed from the gaddi on charges of maladministration. Again in 1884, a British Resident was forced on the Maharaja of Kashmir and in 1891, the maharaja was forced to resign in favour of a Council of Regency.

After 1905, the growth of political unrest in British India put the government on the defensive and it was eager to join hands with the Indian Princes to put up a common front against the nationalists and revolutionaries. Thus, the policy of subordinate isolation effectively gave way to the Policy of Subordinate Union.

The Chamber of Princes (or Narendra Mandal, February 1921)

Cordial cooperation between the government and the Princely states was further consolidated with the formation of Chamber of Princes. The creation of the chamber marked the culmination of the abandonment of the British policy of isolating the Indian rulers from each other and also from the rest of the world. It must be noted that the Chamber was merely an advisory and consultative body. For the purpose of representation in the Chamber, the Indian States were divided into three categories:

- 109 states which enjoyed full legislative and jurisdictional powers.
- 127 states which enjoyed limited powers
- 326 states which could be better classified as jagirs or estates.

Indian States Committee (or Butler Committee, 1927)

Soon the princes were worried about the uninterrupted growth of political interference and raised the question of the extent of sovereignty or Paramount Power. In 1927, with fresh constitutional

reforms on the anvil, they urged the government to properly examine and clearly define the nature and extent of British Paramountcy. This led to the appointment of the Indian States Committee, popularly known as the Butler Committee after its chairman Sir Harcourt Butler, set up with the aim of investigating the relationship between the Paramount Power and the Indian States.

The Indian Princes engaged Sir Leslie Scott as their legal counsel to advance their viewpoint before the Committee. Scott pleaded that the states were originally independent and should remain so except to the extent to which a part of its sovereignty was transferred to the Crown. Or simply that the residuary powers should rest with the Princes. The Butler Committee, however, reported that—

- Paramountcy must remain paramount. It must fulfil its obligations by defining and adopting itself according to the shifting necessities (thus leaving the concept of Paramountcy undefined).
- The Viceroy, and not the Governor-General in Council, was to be the Crown agent in dealing with the states.

1935 to 1947- Policy of Equal Federation

The Indian Princes were invited to participate in the Round Table Conferences held during 1930–32. The Government of India Act of 1935 proposed an All India Federation. The federation of India was to come into existence only when

- States entitled to at least half of the seats (i.e. 52 seats) allotted to the states in the proposed Council of States should agree to join the federation.
- The aggregate population of states in the above category should be at least 50 per cent of the total population of all Indian states.

Since the above conditions were not met, the proposed federation never came up. On the other hand, Congress successes in the Elections of 1937 gave a new push to the slowly but steadily growing national movement in the Princely states.

PRINCELY STATES AND THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Misgovernance in Princely States

The Princely States acknowledged the **British as Paramount Power**, and in return, the British guaranteed the rulers security against all threats—external and internal. Throughout history, internal revolt or external aggression had worked as checks on corrupt rulers. The British rule freed the Indian princes of both these checks, leaving ample scope for misgovernance.

Consequently, a majority of the rulers felt no responsibility towards ensuring welfare of their subjects. They were autocratic and squandered state revenues on living luxurious living. They organised lavish 'shikar parties' and added several women to their harem. The burden naturally fell upon the subjects, who were impelled to pay very high taxes, sometimes even higher than the neighbouring British India. Serfdom, slavery and forced labour also flourished in many states.

There was also a small minority of enlightened rulers who tried to introduce socio-political reforms and promote industrial development. They tried to spread modern education and introduce some measure of popular participation in governance. However, such moves were often resisted by the British, who wanted to keep the Princely States away from any measure of Responsible Government as well as from national movement. And the British representatives in the States or the Residents exercised strict supervision or control in this regard.

Ideas of Democracy and Civil Liberties

The national movement, after it had taken roots in British India, began to exercise a growing influence upon the people of the States. The ideas of democracy and civil liberties that drove the national movement had equal relevance for them as well. In the beginning, these ideas were brought to them by individual nationalists, including 'terrorists' from British India seeking shelter in the states. But gradually the national movement assumed a mass character and its influence became more generalised. In fact, the first ever popular associations in the states were formed during the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Praja Mandals or State Peoples' Conferences

The first political organisations in the states emerged in the form of Praja Mandals or State People's Conferences. Initially, these were set up in states like Hyderabad, Mysore, Baroda, the Kathiawad States, the Deccan States, Jamnagar, Indore and Nawanagar. These bodies threw up some prominent leaders such as **Balwantrao Mehta, Maniklal Kothari and CR Abhyankar**. In 1927, they organised the first All-India gathering of the people of states that culminated in the formation of the **All India States People's Conference (AISPC)**.

Congress and the Princely States

The Congress policy towards the Indian States was first enunciated in 1920 at Nagpur, when the INC passed a resolution calling upon the rulers of princely states to establish a full **responsible government**. However, Congress policy was more complex on the question of organising political movements in Indian States. Though people of the states were free to become members of the Congress and participate in the struggles led by it, they were not to carry any political activity in the states in the name of the Congress. This they could do only either on their own or as members of other organizations such as Praja Mandals.

Clearly, the reason behind this stand of the Congress was the immense difference between the political conditions prevailing in British India and in the Princely States. Since Congress framed its policies on the basis of conditions prevailing in British India, it could not afford to directly associate itself with political movements in the states in the initial stage. Further, the states were legally independent entities and political conditions within the states themselves varied a great deal. The people of the Indian states were also required to build their own strength and advance their own political consciousness to further their specific demands before participating in the more advanced types of movements in British India.

Despite above limitations, the Congress and its members continued to extend support to the struggles in the states in a variety of ways.

In 1929, Jawaharlal Nehru declared, "the Indian states cannot live apart from the rest of India... the only people who have the right to determine the future of the States must be people of these states."

During the 1920s and early 30s, the process of political awakening went ahead in many states. However, the real spurt in the state peoples' movement came after 1935 following two significant developments:

1. The Government of India Act 1935 (proposing formation of an All India Federation).
2. The formation of Congress Ministries in 1937 in a majority of British India provinces.

Government of India Act 1935 and the Federal Scheme

As per the Federal Scheme of the Act of 1935, the Indian States were to be brought into a direct constitutional relationship with British India, as distinct from the existing position in which they were in a direct relationship with the British Crown. This was to be achieved by the establishment of a Federal Indian Legislature with representatives from both British India as well from the Indian States.

However, a peculiar feature of the federal scheme was that, while the representatives from British India were to be elected by the people, those of the States were to be nominated by the rulers. The States were also given disproportionate weightage. In short, the proposed federal structure was planned so as to check the **forces of nationalism**.

The Federal Scheme was therefore opposed by all nationalists and it was demanded that the representatives of states should also be elected instead of being nominated. Naturally, this brought to the forefront, the demand for responsible government in the states.

(The proposed federation never came into existence for the requisite number of states did not agree to join it. The Central government was carried on upto 1946 as per the provisions of the GOI Act 1919).

Congress Ministries (1937-39)

The formation of Congress Ministries in many provinces of British India also aroused the confidence and aspirations of the people of the states. This development exerted immense pressure on the rulers with the state movements reaching a high watermark during the years 1938-39. Praja Mandals sprang up at many places and struggles started in Rajkot, Travancore, Mysore, Patiala, Jaipur, Kashmir and Orissa states. The Congress urged the princes to introduce democratic representative government and to grant fundamental civil rights to the people.

Tripuri Session of the Congress (March 1939) and change in Congress Policy: Following the growth of popular movements in the states, the Congress lost no time in shedding its self-imposed restraint and henceforth increasingly identified itself with the state people's movements. A resolution to this effect was passed by the Congress at its Tripuri session in March 1939.

In 1939 itself, Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as President of the AISPC (Ludhiana Session) and became a symbol of fusion of the popular movements in British India and the Indian States.

Quit India in the States (1942)

In August 1942, the Quit India Movement was launched. For the first time the Congress gave a call to the people of the states to participate fully in the all-India struggle for independence. The people of the states now demanded not only responsible government, but also freedom for India and for states to become integral parts of the Indian nation. From now onwards, the struggle of the people of the states was formally integrated with the struggle of the people in British India.

The princes responded to these struggles with violent repression. The Nizam called the popular agitation anti-Muslim, the Maharaja of Kashmir branded it as anti-Hindu while the Maharaja of Travancore alleged that the agitation was instigated by Christians. Despite repression, the States People's Movement succeeded in awakening national consciousness among the people of the states.

Question of Integration of Indian States (1945-47)

With the end of the Second World War, negotiations began regarding the transfer of power from British to Indian hands. The question of the future of Indian States became critical at this juncture.

Flashforward: The British policy after the Second World War was guided by the aim of ensuring **some sort of future in India** by keeping the Indians divided in whichever way possible. Projecting themselves as pluralist people, they tried to magnify all the diverse distinctions among Indians along the lines of caste, religion, language and culture. The most successful British effort in this aspect was the communal card played by the British.

The Mountbatten Plan (3rd June 1947) in brief-

- The Legislative Assemblies of Bengal and Punjab were to meet in two sections (representing Muslim majority districts and the rest of province) to decide by a simple majority whether the province was to be partitioned or not.
- In case they vote for partition, two dominions and two constituent assemblies shall be created.
- It declared that transfer of power would take place by 15th August 1947 on the basis of dominion status to two successor states, India and Pakistan.
- With the lapse of Paramountcy, the Indian states would be free to join any dominion they liked, India or Pakistan.

Both, the Mountbatten Plan and the Indian Independence Act 1947, did not make clear the position of the princely states regarding the option of independence, leaving them to luxuriate in wild dreams of independent power! Mountbatten later clarified that the Independence Act had released the States from all their obligations to the crown, leaving them 'technically independent or to say, rudderless, on their own'. The old links were broken and if nothing was put in its place, chaos would result. He therefore advised them to forge links with the new nation closest to them.

In the National Provisional Government, **Sardar Patel headed the States Ministry** and urged the Indian princes to show their patriotism and join the Indian Union by surrendering the three subjects of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. He played a vital role at this stage and succeeded in getting a vast majority of the states to accede to the Indian Union through a combination of diplomacy, popular movements and even some arm twisting. By 15th August 1947, 136 states had acceded to the Indian Union. Kashmir signed the Instrument of Accession on 26th October 1947, Junagarh and Hyderabad in 1948. Portuguese enclaves of Goa, Daman and Diu were annexed in December 1961.



Previous Years' Questions – Main Exam

1. What was the role of the States People's Movement in the integration of Indian states? **[UPSC 1996]**
2. What was the significance of the Prajamandal Movement in the Indian states in decade preceding India's Independence? **[UPSC 1998]**
3. Discuss the problem that impeded the integration of the Princely States in the Indian Union. How were these problems tackled? **[UPSC 2003]**
4. Examine the policy of Subordinate Union towards Princely States. Account for the shift from the policy of Subordinate Isolation. **[UPSC 2005]**