

The Indian States

The princely states, also called the Indian states, which covered a total area of 7,12,508 square miles and numbered no fewer than 562, included tiny states such as Bilbari with a population of 27 persons only and some big ones like Hyderabad (as large as Italy) with a population of 14 million. The East India Company acquired, in the process of conquest, important coastal tracts, the valleys of the great navigable rivers and such tracts which were rich in agricultural products and densely populated by prosperous people, while, generally, the Indian states were “the inaccessible and less fertile tracts of the Indian peninsula”.

The making of Indian states was largely governed by the same circumstances which led to the growth of East India Company’s power in India. The evolution of relations between the British authority and states can be traced under the following broad stages.

I. The Company’s Struggle for Equality from a Position of Subordination (1740-1765)

Starting with Anglo-French rivalry with the coming of Dupleix in 1751, the East India Company asserted political identity with capture of Arcot (1751). With the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the East India Company acquired political

power next only to the Bengal nawabs. In 1765 with the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the East India Company became a significant political power.

II. Policy of Ring Fence (1765-1813)

This policy was reflected in Warren Hastings' wars against the Marathas and Mysore, and aimed at creating buffer zones to defend the Company's frontiers. The main threat was from the Marathas and Afghan invaders (the Company undertook to organise Awadh's defence to safeguard Bengal's security). Wellesley's policy of subsidiary alliance was an extension of ring fence—which sought to reduce states to a position of dependence on British Government in India. Major powers such as Hyderabad, Awadh and the Marathas accepted subsidiary alliance. Thus, British supremacy was established.

III. Policy of Subordinate Isolation (1813-1857)

Now, the imperial idea grew and the theory of paramountcy began to develop—Indian states were supposed to act in subordinate cooperation with the British government and acknowledge its supremacy. The states surrendered all forms of external sovereignty but retained sovereignty in internal administration. British Residents were transformed from diplomatic agents of a foreign power to executive and controlling officers of a superior government.

In 1833, the Charter Act ended the Company's commercial functions even as it retained political functions. It adopted the practice of insisting on prior approval/sanction for all matters of succession. In 1834, the Board of Directors issued guidelines to annex states wherever and whenever possible. This policy of annexation culminated in usurpation of eight states by Dalhousie including some big states such as Satara and Nagpur.

IV. Policy of Subordinate Union (1857-1935)

The year 1858 saw the assumption of direct responsibility by the Crown. Because of the states' loyalty during the 1857 revolt and their potential use as breakwaters in political storms of the future, the policy of annexation was abandoned. The new policy was to punish or depose but not to annex. After 1858, the fiction of authority of the Mughal emperor ended; sanction for all matters of succession was required from the Crown since the Crown stood forth as the unquestioned ruler and the paramount power. Now the ruler inherited the *gaddi* not as a matter of right but as a gift from the paramount power, because the fiction of Indian states standing in a status of equality with the Crown as independent, sovereign states ended with the Queen adopting the title of "*Kaiser-i-Hind*" (Queen Empress of India). The paramount supremacy of the Crown presupposed and implied the subordination of states. The British government exercised the right to interfere in the internal spheres of states—partly in the interest of the princes, partly in the interest of people's welfare, partly to secure proper conditions for British subjects and foreigners and partly in the interest of the whole of India.

The British government was further helped in this encroachment by modern developments in communication—railways, roads, telegraph, canals, post offices, press and public opinion. The Government of India exercised complete and undisputed control in international affairs—it could declare war, peace or neutrality for states. According to the Butler Commission in 1927, "For the purpose of international relations, state territory is in the same position as British territory and state subjects in the same position as British subjects."

■ Curzon's Approach

Curzon stretched the interpretation of old treaties to mean that the princes, in their capacity as servants of people, were supposed to work side-by-side with the governor-general in the scheme of Indian government. He adopted a policy of patronage and 'intrusive surveillance'. He thought the relations between the states and government were neither feudal nor federal, but a type not based on a treaty but consisting of a series of relationships having grown under different historical conditions that, in the course of time, gradually conformed to a single line.

The new trend seemed to reduce all states to a single type—uniformly dependent on the British government and considered as an integral part of Indian political system.

■ Post-1905

A policy of cordial cooperation began to counter progressive and revolutionary developments in face of large-scale political unrests.

According to the recommendations of the Montford Reforms (1921), a Chamber of Princes (Narendra Mandal) was set up as a consultative and advisory body having no say in the internal affairs of individual states and having no powers to discuss matters concerning existing rights and freedoms. For the purpose of the chamber the Indian states were divided into three categories—

1. Directly represented—109
2. Represented through representatives—127
3. Recognised as feudal holdings or *jagirs*.

Butler Committee

The question of extent of sovereignty and paramountcy was still undefined. The Butler Committee (1927) was set up to examine the nature of relationship between the princely states and government. It gave the following recommendations—

1. Paramountcy must remain supreme and must fulfil its obligations, adopting and defining itself according to the shifting necessities of time and progressive development of states.

2. States should not be handed over to an Indian Government in British India, responsible to an Indian legislature, without the consent of states.

Thus, “**paramountcy**” was left undefined and this hydra-headed creature was left to feed on usage, Crown’s prerogative and the princes’ implied consent.

V. Policy of Equal Federation (1935-1947): A Non-Starter

The Government of India Act, 1935 proposed a Federal Assembly with 125 out of 375 seats for the princes and the Council of States with 104 out of 160 seats for the princes, under its scheme of an all-India federation, which was subject to ratification by states representing more than half of the population and entitled to more than half of the seats in the Council of States.

This scheme never came into existence and after the outbreak of World War II (September 1939) it was dropped altogether.

VI. Integration and Merger

After World War II began and a position of non-cooperation was adopted by the Congress, the British government tried to break the deadlock through the Cripps Mission (1942), Wavell Plan (1945), Cabinet Mission (1946) and Attlee’s statement (February 1947).

Cripps held that the British government did not contemplate transferring paramountcy of Crown to any other party in India. The states tried various schemes to forge a union of their own, envisaging themselves as sovereign in

status or as a third force in the Indian political scene. The June 3rd Plan and Attlee's statement made it clear that the states were free to join either of the two dominions, and Mountbatten refused to give a sovereign status to the states.

Sardar Patel, who was in charge of the states' ministry in the interim cabinet, helped by V.P. Menon, the secretary in the ministry, appealed to the patriotic feeling of rulers to join the Indian dominion in matters of defence, communication and external affairs—the three areas which had been part of the paramountcy of the Crown and over which the states had anyway no control. By August 15, 1947, 136 states had joined the Indian Union but others remained precariously outside.

■ Plebiscite and Army Action

1. Junagarh The Muslim Nawab wanted to join Pakistan but a Hindu majority population wanted to join the Indian Union. In the face of repressive attitude of the nawab, there was a plebiscite which decided in favour of India.

2. Hyderabad Hyderabad wanted a sovereign status. It signed a Standstill Agreement with India in November 1947. Indian troops withdrew and the Nizam's police and stormtroopers (*Razakkars*) took over. The Nizam wanted an outlet to the sea (Goa). The violence and supply of foreign arms prompted Indian troops to move in again in 1948—described as “a police action to restore law and order”. Hyderabad acceded in November 1949.

3. Kashmir The state of Jammu and Kashmir had a Hindu prince and a Muslim majority population. The prince envisaged a sovereign status for the state and was reluctant to accede to either of the dominions. As he procrastinated, the newly established state of Pakistan sent its forces behind a front of tribal militia and moved menacingly towards Srinagar. It was now that the prince was forced to sign an Instrument of Accession (October 1947) with the Indian Union, endorsed by the popular leader Sheikh Abdullah. Indian troops were despatched to defend the state against the raiders from Pakistan. India's complaints to the UN Security

Council regarding raids from Pakistan and the Indian offer to settle the status of the state through a plebiscite led to a ceasefire but left 84,000 square km of area under Pakistani occupation. The special status of Jammu and Kashmir was recognised under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which implied a limited jurisdiction of the Indian Union over the state as compared to other states.

■ Gradual Integration

The problem now was two-fold—

- (i) of transforming the states into viable administrative units, and
- (ii) of absorbing them into the constitutional units.

This was sought to be solved by—

1. incorporating smaller states (216 such states) into contiguous provinces and listed in Part A; for instance, 39 states of Orissa and Chhattisgarh were incorporated into Central Provinces, Orissa. Gujarat states were incorporated into Bombay;

2. making some states as centrally administered for strategic or special reasons, listed in Part-C (61 states)—Himachal Pradesh, Vindhya Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Bhopal, etc.;

3. creating five unions—United States of Kathiawar, United States of Matsya, Patiala and East Punjab States Union, Rajasthan, and United States of Travancore-Cochin (later Kerala).

Initially these states acceded with respect to defence, communication, external affairs; later they felt that a closer association was necessary. The five unions and Mysore accepted Indian jurisdiction in Union, concurrent subjects except taxation and subject to differences as under Article 238 and the supervisory power of Union for ten years.

The Seventh Amendment (1956) abolished Part-B states as a class and formed one class out of Parts A and B; thus special provisions relating to Part B states were deleted.

The Indian states thus became part of one uniform political set-up.