

The Other India of the Maharajas

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Some of the most remarkable experiments in education, social development, public health, and industrial progress took place, not in British India, but in princely states



Illustration for representation

Last weekend, I was in Kota to commemorate the life of Maharao Umed Singh II who ruled the Hadoti Rajput state from 1889 to 1940. The occasion was the launch of an English translation of Dr Jagat Narayan's book on his life which brings alive a ruler and an era that definitely deserve more attention that they usually receive. Walking through the wide alleys of the magnificent Umed Bhawan and standing in the grand Durbar Hall, I found myself thinking about how easily we have allowed the history of princely India to disappear into a handful of clichés—opulent palaces, elephants and horses, Rolls Royce cars, hunted tigers, debauchery and scandals. Yet, princely India was no mere footnote in our modern history and behind the spectacle was a larger and complicated political world.

On the eve of Independence, the nearly 560 princely states accounted for about 40 per cent of the sub-continent's territory, with the princes controlling the destinies of about 25 per cent of undivided India's population. While a vast majority were microscopic estates, a 100-odd states covered more than half a million square miles and contained several million subjects. It was another India, existing alongside the directly British-administered dominions.

The princes were not independent and bound to the British paramountcy through treaties. But they were not merely British puppets and had varied degrees of internal autonomy, and held on to their provincial armies and administration. At the Round Table Conferences in London, they were negotiating alongside British politicians and Indian nationalists on a proposed federation of British India and Indian States. Princely troops served in imperial battles in Afghanistan, Africa, China, and the world wars. Indian cavalry regiments, including the Mysore and Jodhpur Lancers, played celebrated roles in the Battle of Haifa in 1918, when Allied forces captured the Ottoman-held port.

Of course, like democratic leaders of today who come in a variety of shades and excesses, princes too had their quirks. That is what possibly prompted Rudyard Kipling to famously comment: 'Providence created a maharajah to provide mankind a spectacle'. Some were indeed extravagant, inept and debased. TIME reported rumours surrounding Bhupinder Singh of Patiala's lavish lifestyle and London visits—huge hotel suites, extraordinary clothing expenses, elaborate food arrangements. His large household, numerous wives, concubines, and children, and legendary appetite for luxury earned him the moniker, 'His Exhausted Highness'. But to reduce all of princely India to such excesses would be like writing the history of modern India solely from its scandals.

There was another side to the story. Some of the most remarkable experiments in education, social development, public health, and industrial progress took place, not in British India, but in princely states. The 1931 Census recorded literacy at 33.7 per cent in Cochin, 28.9 per cent in Travancore, and 20.9 per cent in Baroda, compared with 11.1 per cent in Bengal, 10.8 per cent in both Bombay and Madras—all three major British Presidencies. Female literacy at about 15 per cent in Cochin and Travancore was well ahead of most British provinces. Baroda, which started off with a disadvantage with just eight per cent literacy in 1891, against 10 per cent in neighbouring British Gujarat, rose to 21 per cent in 1931 under Sayajirao Gaekwad, leaving British Gujarat behind at 13 per cent. Mysore under Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar saw unprecedented modernisation—hydroelectric power, industry, banking, engineering, science, and higher education.

Umed Singh II too catapulted Kota to modernity and progress. His reign saw fresh land-revenue settlement, several irrigation reservoirs, city water-supply schemes, agricultural improvements, veterinary dispensaries, and cooperative institutions. An advanced municipal administration was established, whose princely remnants are still seen, just like in Mysore. In 1927, Kota established a cooperative bank that still survives. Education

expanded from the first state high school in 1911 to an intermediate college, two high schools, and 109 schools by the end of his reign. A representative Praja Pratinidhi Sabha appeared in 1918, and in 1927 the state prohibited the marriage of minor children—a major social reform in traditional Rajput society. His reign also saw a dramatic reversal of an older political division. Jhalawar, carved out of Kota by the British in 1838, was reorganised. Fifteen of the 17 parganas originally taken from Kota were restored in 1899.

Princely courts were also major centres of cultural patronage. Mysore supported musicians, composers, painters, scholars, and writers, and created a public institution of the Dasara celebrations. Baroda patronised Raja Ravi Varma and indigenous crafts. Jaipur's court developed institutions such as the Gunjankhana to support artists. Princely patronage helped sustain classical music, dance, painting, Sanskrit, and regional language scholarship, religious festivals, literature, and crafts. The cultural consequences of the disappearance of princely India deserve consideration alongside the political ones.

Umed Singh, Gaekwad, Wadiyar, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore and other rulers inhabited a world caught between two ages. While they inherited an older political and feudal order, they encountered a rapidly changing modern world. They were constantly negotiating with British paramountcy, and at the same time experimenting with modern education, technology, and new demands for administration, social reform, and representation.

Strolling through Kota, I was struck by how much of that world still survives—in its buildings, institutions, collections, and memories. Perhaps it is time to revisit the story of the India of the Maharajas. Not to over-romanticise it or excuse its inequalities or excesses, but simply to recover its complexity and many contributions. For before these states disappeared into the Republic, they had been an important part of the making of modern India.

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