



INDIAN STATES – THEIR PROBLEMS AND THE FORMATION OF THE CHAMBER OF PRINCES

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ABSTRACT

Queen Victoria's proclamation had gone a long way in assuaging the feelings of the Princes and assuring them that whatever the British authorities might or might not do, the continuity of the ruling households was no longer in doubt. They were no less comforted by the fact that leading statesmen in England had begun to realise the importance of Indian states in view of the services they had rendered in suppressing the revolt in 1857 by actively siding with the British. Opinion was also gaining ground in British official circles that the steadfast loyalty of the Princes would ever be an asset for the British power in India for tiding any future storms there.

By the year 1858 the Indian states became part and parcel of the British empire in India. A machinery was sought to be evolved during the next 50 years for controlling the states¹.

The Crown's relationship with the Indian States was conducted by the Governor General in council. Since the Governor-General was in-charge of the Political Department, his executive council tended in practice to leave states affairs to him and the Political Department, so the Political Department came gradually to assume the position of a government within the a government. The political officers in the various states had comprehensive though unwritten authority. A secret code of political practice based on precedents and policy had been slowly built up accessible only to officers of the Political department to the disadvantage of the Princes.

The policy of isolation imposed on princely India made impossible any combined opposition to diplomatic aggression. The Political Department ignored the fact that constitutional position of the States differed greatly and that methods could not be applied uniformly to all states, irrespective of their treaty position.

The terror of the Department in the States was such that it was said 'the whisper of the Residency was the thunder of the State'. "The sovereignty of the Crown is everywhere unchallenged : it had itself laid down the limitations of its own prerogative."

Successive Governor-General and Viceroys put on it their own interpretations while projecting the views of the British Government. The one idea that runs like a common link in all these interpretations is that British authority in India must be treated as paramount and supreme in all cases².

The leading Princes, however, never formally accepted this definition of their relations with the paramount power. They contended that constitutionally, their relations with the Crown were primarily based on treaty.

The British they asserted ignored the treaties when it suited them to do so. The consequence had been a series of encroachments on the internal sovereignty of the States. The first ruling in this behalf was laid down by the Government of India in 1884 in a letter addressed to the Chief commissioner of the Central Provinces in

which it was stated that the succession of the native State is invalid until it receives in some form the sanction of the British authority.

The ruler thus did not inherit his gaddi as of right, but as a gift from the paramount power. The political and economic, consolidation of India necessitated further encroachments on the internal sovereignty of the rulers. Successive viceroys laid emphasis upon the duties and responsibilities of the rulers. This is evident from speech of Lord Curzon where he exhorted the Indian ruler to be 'the servant as well as the master of his people.'

It is noteworthy that several agreements for the renewal of the right of currency and coinage lapsed during the regent's administration.³ In Some cases the Ruler had to jointly administer his States with the Regent even after he attained majority.⁴ Lastly, the States could not cede, sell⁵, exchange⁶, or part with their territories to other States without the approval of the Paramount Power.

In addition, increased indebtedness, extravagance, and loss of revenue were some of the factors which led to the "economic embarrassment" of the States and justified the interference of the Paramount Power. Such interference usually led to the replacement of the princely administration by a Political Officer of the Government of India.⁷

The number of states under direct British administration during the five year period 1898-1902. The figures are astonishing. Out of about 250 states with an area of over 200 square miles or nearly a quarter were under direct British rule.

By the end of the nineteenth century the nationalist movement was beginning to pose a formidable threat to the authority of the Raj. A new mood of defiance was abroad characterized by increasingly bitter sallies against British rule in the vernacular press, acts of terrorism against British officials, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra, and by organized agitational campaigns against unpopular British measures such as the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Punjab Canal Colonies Bill of 1907.

Hitherto, the leading nationalist organization, the Indian National Congress had leaned towards a more moderate programme with an emphasis on constitutional representation. But the influence of the moderates inside Congress was declining, acknowledged friends of British rule like G.K. Gokhale were losing ground to professed extremists like B.G. Tilak and Lajpat Rai. The government was worried⁸.

In August 1914, the First World War started. It necessitated closer administrative co-operation between the princely states and British provinces⁹. In pursuance of the new policy, the Maharaja of Bikaner was nominated to the War Cabinet and the Imperial War Conference and leading chiefs were summoned to attend a conference in October 1916 for consultations with regard to war efforts and certain questions concerning the princely states such as administration during the minority of a ruler, education and training of minor princes and ceremonials to be observed at the installation and investiture of a prince. This Conference was a prelude to the establishment of the Chamber of Princes¹⁰.

CHAMBER OF PRINCES

Based loosely on wood's sketch of May 1916, Montagu's own scheme for a council of princes was formulated in November 1917¹¹, amended in February 1918 in discussion with the princes and published as part of the Joint Report on Indian constitutional reforms in April. As envisaged in 1918 the council was the consist of

all 11-gun salute states and above plus representatives of the rest. It would meet yearly to debate question which affect the States generally and other questions which are of concern either to the Empire as a whole, or to British India and the States in common. The Viceroy would be President and would approve the agenda, but there was provision for a small standing committee of princes which would assist in its preparation and to which the Viceroy or the Political Department might refer for advice between sittings. Proceedings would be in camera¹². Inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in 1921, the Chamber of Princes as it was now known consisted of 108 rulers sitting in their own right and 12 representing the rulers of 127 other 9-gun and non salute states¹³.

Thus the years 1919-21 were of utmost significance in the constitutional history of India for the two important events that occurred during this period. First, the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms marked the beginning of the grant of responsible government to the Provinces. Secondly, the establishment of the Chamber of Princes as a forum of mutual consultations among the Princes was a step in breaking the age-long policy of isolation. The inauguration of the Narendra Mandal, as the chamber was called, furthermore, was also a recognition of the rights claimed by the Princes to have a voice in the Councils of the Empire and to participate in the discussions on "questions affecting the State as a whole" and pertaining to the States as well as British India.

The Chamber took up issues of quite wide range, Broadly, these may be divided into three main categories (i) personal (ii) issues of all India nature and (iii) those relating to the Indian states vis-à-vis the paramount power and inter-state questions which were decided by the paramount power¹⁴.

The chamber could create an atmosphere of solidarity and unity in the princely order but it did not always succeed in asserting itself. The Foreign Political Department acted very slowly. This is evident from the fact that between 1921 and 1930 only 10 of its 23 resolutions were accepted by the Political Department¹⁵. The effectiveness of the Chamber depended largely on the attitude of the Viceroy and on *the* unthe princes.

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