

# The Freedom Struggle in Princely States



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## **Introduction-**

Before the independence of India, there were many princely states in India, referred to by the Britishers as Native States. These states varied from very large to very small in area and population and were scattered all over the country interspersing the British Indian areas. These areas were ruled indirectly by the British through the princes themselves. There were about 600 states in India which were ruled over by Indian princes. They covered about one-third of India's territory and about one-fifth of India's population. Many of these states were so small as to be no more than zamindaris.

There were some like Hyderabad, which were large and had a population of several million people. These states were allowed to continue after the revolt of 1857 because their timely support especially by the rulers of Mysore, Patiala and Hyderabad strengthened their claims as the trusted and faithful military, administrative and political allies of the British rule. The British rulers solemnly affirmed their protection and the right to perpetual existence. Moreover, the British authorities began to use the princes to prevent the growth of national unity and to counter the rising national movement.

The form of government in these states was monarchical and the general perception of the British administrators as well as their nationalist opponents was that they were tradition-bound, unchanging, disinterested in progress. The people of princely states were burdened with higher land taxes, non-protection of civil liberties and were largely deprived of modernization in education, transport, communication taking place in the rest of British India.

These states were ruled by the princes in a most authoritarian manner. People suffered from extreme economic and political disabilities in these states. The burden of land revenue was generally much higher in the princely states compared to British administration and this was linked to their administrative machinery. They had no civil rights and no law except that of the ruler and had to perform forced labour. While the people were oppressed, the rulers led opulent and degenerated lives. The princely states were generally run on laws that were a combination of enactment based on the British Indian legal codes and personal decrees and orders of the rulers. The element of arbitrariness was so significant that such decrees could be withdrawn or modified at the discretion of the prince any time. There was no institutional check on the arbitrary powers enjoyed by the princes within their own territories.

The middle class too had their grievances against the prevailing economic, political and social conditions in these states. The system of education in these states was quite retarded and outdated, and hence they demanded the introduction of modern education. Freedom of the press and other civil rights were completely absent. So, the grant of these civil rights was one of their demands. Since there was no representative body of the people, they demanded the introduction of some form of representative government in these states.

Ultimately, it was the British Government that was responsible for the situation in which the Indian States found themselves in the twentieth century. Any sympathy with nationalism, such as that expressed by the Maharaja of Baroda, was looked upon with extreme disfavour. Many a potential reformer among the rulers was gradually drained of initiative by the constant surveillance and interference

exercised by the British residents. Any attempt at political, social and economic reform in these states was most ruthlessly putdown.

## **Political Mobilisation in the Princely States: Different stages**

The advance of the national movement in British India, and the accompanying increase in political consciousness about democracy, responsible government and civil liberties had an inevitable impact on the people of the States. The success of the National Congress, though limited in securing concessions to the people of British India, naturally made the people of the princely states realize the need for organizing themselves first at local level and then at all India level if they were to get their grievances redressed.

The political mobilisation in the princely states passed through three distinct stages-

In the **first stage**, the mobilisation was centred on some specific local grievances such as employment of too many 'foreigners' or outsiders in the administrative services of the state and a lack of freedom of press and assembly. The main demands of these early agitators were greater recruitment of the state's subject in government employment, the guarantee of civil liberties especially the freedom of press, assembly, an association, and in a few instances even the establishment of representative assembly in the state.

The **second stage** emerged in the late 1920s and first half of the 1930s. Now the petitioning leads to direct confrontation and public protests in the form of street demonstrations by the literate urban class of people. The main demand now is greater popular representation and the legal right to form political associations.

Another major demand was privy purses to check arbitrary expenditure of the rulers and increased funding of social infrastructure especially in the field of education and health.

In the **third stage**, peasant mobilisation emerged and became the prominent feature of second half of 1930s and 1940s on the whole. In fact peasant based movements developed simultaneously. They went side by side with the urban educated middle class mobilization. The major challenge for the political leadership in the princely states was to broaden its popular base, coordinate their efforts with the political associations in British India and to achieve some leverage with the rulers.

### **Growth of Political Consciousness in States: Formation of All-India States People's Conference-**

The rise of the States people's movements was also due to certain policies and activities of the British. The British aggravated the conditions of the people of the princely states through the policy of "divide and rule". A much more powerful influence was exercised by the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement launched in 1920; around this time and under its impact, numerous local organizations of the States' people came into existence. Earliest of them was in Baroda in 1917, followed by Kathiawar, Mysore, Hyderabad, etc.

Nationalists among the States people, such as Balwantray Mehta and Manilal Kothari of Kathiawar and G.R. Abhyankar of the Deccan, convened an All-India States People's Conference in December 1927, which, though based on West Indian initiative, was attended by 700 delegates from all over India. The conference also wanted the distinction between public revenue and the private

income of the ruler clearly recognized. The AISPC'S aim was to influence the governments of the states to initiate the necessary reforms in the administration by the force of collective opinion of the people and the states and to emphasize popular representation and self-government by the elective principle in all states. Almost from the time the first conference was called in 1927, the AISPC became a permanent political organization. It was consistently anti-feudal, but not as clearly anti-imperialist as the National Congress. This was to a great extent explained by the fact that as far as the States people were concerned, the feudal system was the more direct exploiter.

The years 1938-39, in fact, stand out as years of a new awakening in the Indian States and were witness to a large number of movements demanding responsible government and other reforms. *Praja mandals* mushroomed in many States that had earlier no such organizations. Major struggles broke out in Jaipur, Kashmir, Rajkot, Patiala, Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore, and the Orissa States. The princes replied with ruthless repression. Some of them tried to stem the tide of popular revolt by inflaming communal passions. Gradually the AISPC realized the need for mass contacts in place of mere petitions and began to work accordingly.

### **Congress attitude towards it-**

In the starting phase, Indian National Congress, representing the broad democratic spectrum of opinion in the country, had consciously distanced itself from the princes as well as from the political mobilisation in the princely states. This strategy of non-interference continued even with the coming of spectacular mass mobilisation in the early Gandhian phase. There were perhaps some weighty issues that were responsible for such an approach of noninterference in the politics of princely states.

1. There were the constraints of resources at the disposal of Congress.
2. The nationalist leadership did not want to fight simultaneously at two fronts because it was aware that princes existed only due to protection of the paramount power of the British.
3. Congress leadership was aware that the movements in princely states were linked to the appeals based on class, religious and linguistic identities and could result in more regional and religious fragmentation.

However, while generally not allowing strife around class issues, Gandhian leadership permitted 'constructive work' such as anti-untouchability in the states. Gandhi actively supported the Vaikom Satyagraha in Travancore in 1925, where the demand for the opening of the road around Vaikom temple for the use of 'untouchables' was raised.

The policy of the Indian National Congress towards the Indian states had been first enunciated in 1920 at Nagpur when a resolution calling upon the Princes to grant full responsible government in their States had been passed. The Congress also allowed persons from states to join the Congress organisation as its primary members. But Congress also made it conditional with rider that Congress members in the states could not take part in any political activity in the states as Congressmen or in the name of Congress but only in either in their private capacity, as individuals, or as members of the local political associations. The stress was that the state subjects should develop their own organisations and should not look to outside support.

In 1927, the Congress reiterated its resolution of 1920. In later years, the Congress demanded that the Princes guarantee fundamental rights to their people. However, the informal relation between nationalist organisation and local praja

mandals existed and paved the way for more intense mobilisation patterns in the states in subsequent phases.

Nehru, representing a leftward shift in the priorities of Congress declared in Lahore Session of the Congress (1929) that the fate of states was linked with the rest of India and that only the people of states would have right to determine the political future of the states. But as late as 1934 Gandhiji, reiterated the 1920 non-intervention stand. He argued that any movement started externally could not be successful, and that the people of the states should learn self-reliance. However, he too supported the Congress resolution of 1920 that the princes should accord fundamental rights to their subjects.

The situation in the princely states was changing dramatically in the 1930s due to some major developments-

1. Firstly, the Government of India Act (1935) conceived of a plan of federation in which the Indian states were to be brought into a direct constitutional relationship with the British India and the states were to send representatives to the Federal Legislature. It was proposed that the native states would get 2/5th of the seats in the Upper House and 1/3rd of the seats in the lower house. The Scheme was undemocratic as these representatives would be nominees of the Princes and not democratically elected representatives of the people. Although this part of the Act was never implemented, both Congress and the All-India States' People's Conference opposed the move and demanded that all representatives for the Federal Legislature should be on the basis of a popular elective principle.
2. Secondly, the assumption of offices by the Congress in the majority of provinces -of British India in 1937 had an electrifying impact on the popular



participation in the political processes, both in British Indian territories and the states.

3. Thirdly, the left-oriented Congress was under the spell of radical leaders such as Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose in the 1930s and the Congress Socialist Party was demanding a more radical policy in the princely states.

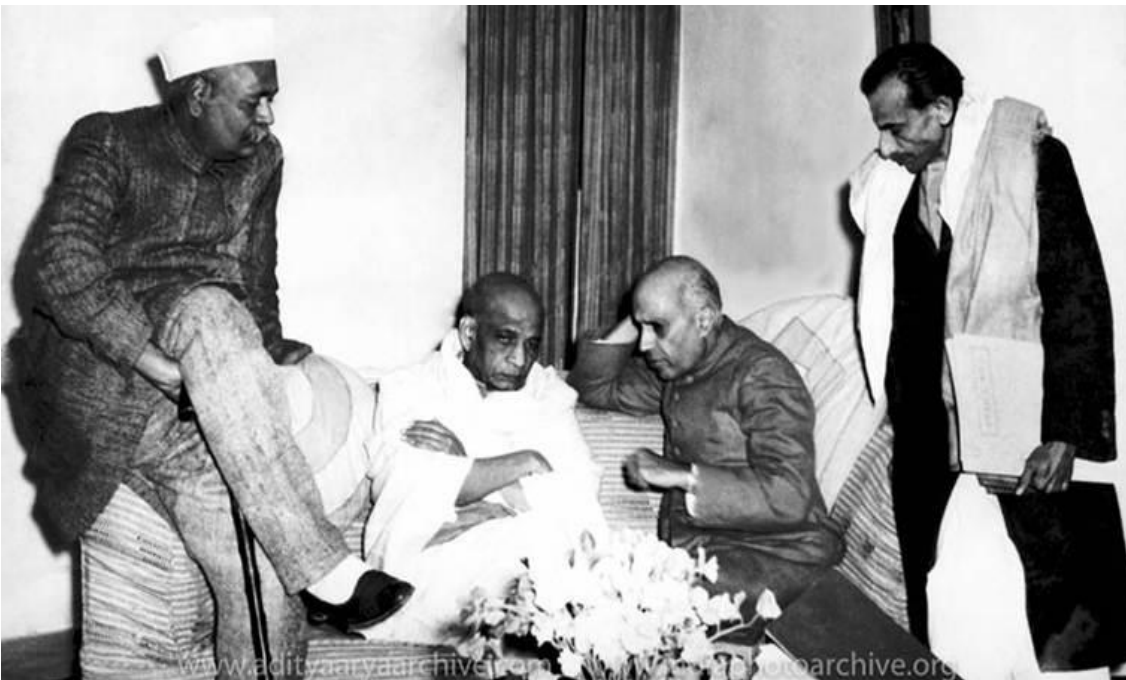
Such development brought about a massive change in Congress policy towards these movements. The Congress at its Tripuri Session (1939) passed a resolution enunciating new tactics. It removed the earlier restraint on the Congress activities in the states. Now there was greater identification between the Congress and the praja mandals. In 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as the president of the All-India States' People's Conference, a step that marked the merger of the two streams of democratic movement in princely states and British India. Thus the ending of the oppressive rule of the Indian princes became a part of the nationalist movement's programme and the aim of building a united India was firmly laid down.

Things came to a head again in 1942 with the launching of the Quit India Movement. This time the Congress made no distinction between British India and the Indian States and the call for struggle was extended to the people of the States. The people of the States thus formally joined the struggle for Indian independence. The negotiations for transfer of power that ensued after the end of the War brought the problem of the States to the centre of the stage. Thus, by the time Indian independence reached its final stage in the 1940s, national awakening and mobilization of people in princely states by nationalistic movements have already created the essential political infrastructure for furthering the mobilization for and pace of India's freedom along with a foundation for the integration of princely states into Indian Union.

## **On the Eve of Independence-**

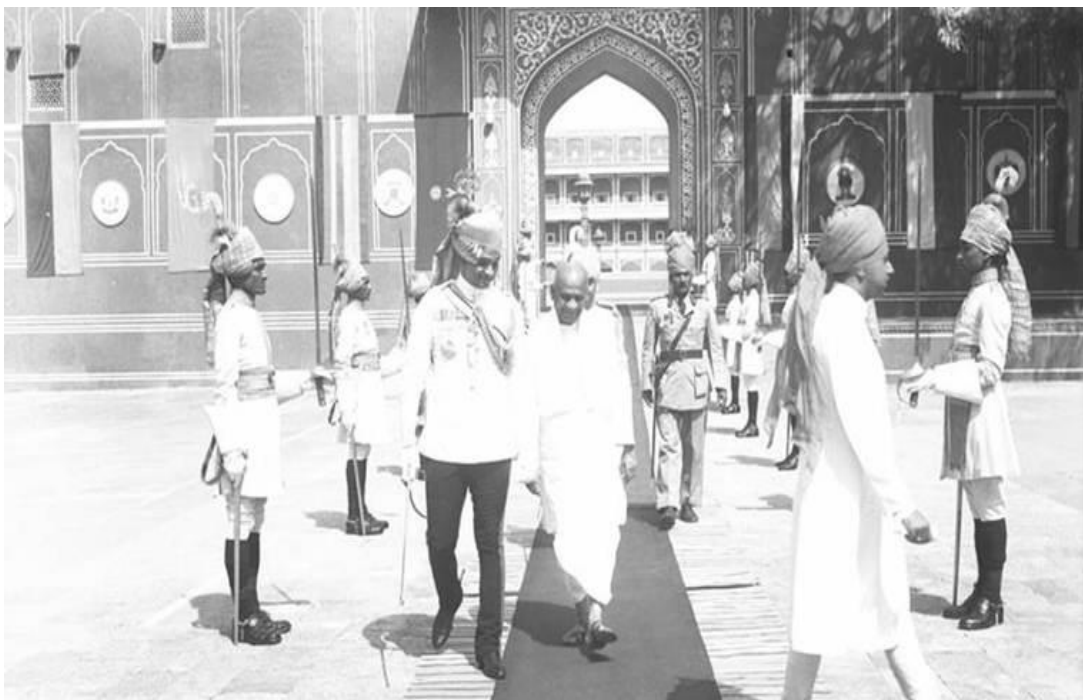
With the impending lapse of British paramountcy, the question of the future of the princely states became a vital one. Unsurprisingly, when the British announced their departure, most of the princes thought it to be the best moment to claim independent statehood. The issue of the princely states was not an easy affair to resolve.

It was, indeed, to the credit of the national leadership, especially Sardar Patel, that the extremely complex situation was handled in a manner that defused the situation to a great degree. The 'Iron man of India', Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was valued on one hand for being politically astute and on the other hand for his pragmatic acumen, necessary to bring together the more than 500 bits and pieces of royal territories into the fold of the Indian union.



Acharya Kripalani with Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad

On June 27, 1947, he was made the minister in charge of the new States Department. He, along with his secretary, V.P. Menon, was given the task of negotiating with the princes. Between them, they produced a draft instrument of accession which would be signed by the princes as an agreement to transfer control of defence, foreign affairs and communications to the Congress government. Patel often invoked the patriotism of the princes in his attempt to convince them to join India. On other occasions he reminded them of the possibility of anarchy and on event of their refusal to join. He also introduced the concept of ‘privy purses’ as a payment to be made to the families of the princes for their agreement to integrate with India.



Sardar Patel with the Maharaja of Jaipur.

In the following days, Patel, Menon and Mountbatten managed to convince most of the princes to join the Indian union. Bikaner, Baroda and a few other states from Rajasthan were the first to join. As the day of independence drew closer, Patel decided on using force where necessary, for instance in the case of the

Maharaja of Orissa. Most of the States succumbed to a combination of diplomatic pressure, arm-twisting, popular movements and their own realization that independence was not a realistic alternative and signed the Instruments of Accession.

The ultimate protection provided by the British enabled the rulers of the States to withstand popular pressure to a considerable degree, as happened in Rajkot. As a result, there was a much greater tendency in these States for the movements to resort to violent methods of agitation — this happened not only in Hyderabad, but also in Travancore, Patiala, and the Orissa States among others. In Hyderabad, for example, even the State Congress ultimately resorted to violent methods of attack, and, in the final count, the Nizam could only be brought into line by the Indian Army. The armed takeover of Hyderabad through ‘Operation Polo’ by the Indian troops in September 1948 was celebrated as a democratic step by the people of Hyderabad state.

The case of Jammu & Kashmir was little different. At the time of partition of India, Hari Singh, the ruler of Jammu & Kashmir, delayed making a decision about the future of his state. But when armed tribesmen from Pakistan infiltrated J&K, Hari Singh realized that he needed Indian help. He reached out to prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Patel who agree to send troops on the condition that the maharaja signs an instrument of accession (IOA), handing over control of defence, foreign affairs, and communication. By signing on this legal document on October 26, 1947, Hari Singh, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, agreed that the State would become a part of India.



Thus it can be said that the unification of India was made possible not only by the efforts of Sardar Patel but also by the potential presence of mass pressures. The ease of integration and merger of the states into Indian Union, with minimal use of coercion in the process, was due to fact that political mobilisation had already been under way in most of the states. Finally, as a the tricolour rose proudly to announce its independence on August 15, 1947, the 'Iron man of India' along with Menon had managed to bring together more than 550 states under the governance of the Indian union.

### **Suggested Readings-**

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- Menon, V.P., *Integration of the Indian States*, Sangam Books Ltd, 1985.
- Gandhi, Raj Mohan, *Patel A Life*, Navjivan Trust, 2011.