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‘The Indian Maharaja under check...’: the abolition of privy purses and princely privileges, 1967-71 and the end of an era

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‘The Indian *Maharaja* under check...’:¹ The abolition of Privy Purses & Princely Privileges, 1967-71 and the *end of an era*

Abstract

This article attends to the abolition of the privy purses and princely privileges of ex-rulers achieved between May 1967 to December 1971 in a controversial constitutional episode, in a period of *transition* for Indian democracy. Moving beyond the usual figures under focus namely Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Principal Secretary P.N. Haksar, it brings to fore a wider cast of characters and their concerns during this campaign. Second, it seeks to take the established binary between the old of the Indian National Congress and the new of Indira’s Congress (Ruling) from the split in 1969, to stand for a wider generational *passage* of time at both international and internal levels. Third, probing this overlapping interaction, it presents it as one among final episodes of independent India emerging from its British world of 1947, whose relevance can be sketched beyond pressure politics inside a party and mass politics outside it. Finally, it presents this episode as a prism through which one can see the end of the ‘first phase’ of India’s democracy and one of its inherited institutions.

Introduction

In the summer of 1947, upon the lapse of British paramountcy, the accession of Princely India into the independent dominion(s) was achieved largely via a constitutionally guaranteed exchange mechanism, which offered (284 out of) the 550+ rulers an annual privy purse, allowed them to retain their personal properties and extended privileges like exemption from central taxes, provincial arrests and import duties.² This arrangement secured the territorial (near)union of India, apart from being considered, in economic terms, ‘a veritable steal’, as

¹ *Hindustan Times (HT)* 20 July 1967.

² See Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917-1947* (Cambridge, 2002), V.P. Menon, *Integration of the Indian States* (Hyderabad, 2014) and Y.K. Bangash, *A Princely Affair: The Accession and Integration of the Princely States of Pakistan, 1947-1955* (Karachi, 2015).

revenues from princely states were expected to amount ‘ten times’ the ‘pay out to the princes’ in 10-years’ time.³ Subsequently, ‘several princes were installed as *Rajpramukh* (governor)...of states [and]...some princes accepted diplomatic postings’.⁴ Others entered parliamentary politics, ‘where their money, contacts and enduring appeal enabled them to win’ handsomely. So successful were some that it was quipped in 1967 that ‘the princes have...emerged as the natural leaders of the masses...’⁵

In that summer of 1967, the abolition of these privy purses emerged within a 10-point socialist programme that has been understood as a practical instrument for the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her principled secretary P.N. Haksar, to energise the Indian National Congress Party after its reverses in the February 1967 general election. Steadily ‘increased’ princely electoral behaviour across their ‘traditional’ regions of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, was considered a contributing factor to this upset. The total number of princely parliamentarians and legislators had gone from 45 in 1951-56 to 75 in 1967-70.⁶ Among these, ‘fewer than half...were either Congress or ex-Congress members’, and princely support of Congress was declining ‘prior’ to the 1967 elections.⁷

However, as Ian Copland has recently argued, ‘the late 1960s, a period rife with crises in India...merits closer attention’,⁸ dotted as it was also by a dramatic ‘disappearance of British symbols’ of influence;⁹ one of which is the focus of this article. In fact, Copland has offered

³ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (London, 2008), pp. 43–44; three exceptions were Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Junagadh, pp. 35–83.

⁴ Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 275–279.

⁵ Ian Copland, ‘Crucibles of Hindutva? V.D. Savarkar, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Indian princely states’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25: 3 (2002), pp. 230–231.

⁶ W.L. Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6: 9 (1971), p. 537.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 538.

⁸ Ian Copland, ‘History in Flux: Indira Gandhi and the “Great All-Party Campaign” for the Protection of the Cow, 1966-8’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49: 2 (2014), p. 412, p. 435.

⁹ Paul M. McGarr, ‘The Viceroys and Disappearing from the Roundabouts in Delhi: British symbols of power in post-colonial India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 49: 3 (2015), pp. 787–831.

that time as a candidate for a ‘turning point’ in contemporary Indian history, to add to Paul McGarr’s description of the preceding 1960-64 period as that of ‘the *Other Transfer of Power*’.¹⁰ Typifying it were Indira Gandhi’s ‘leftward turns’, which involved nationalising 14 banks (including those British owned) in July 1969 and abolishing privy purses and princely privileges in September 1970, with Haksar terming the latter as ‘out of place and out of time’,¹¹ spanning the November 1969 split within the Congress party.

This article is interested in exploring precisely this understanding of the post-imperial *afterlife* in India wherein the then-political leadership, in its search for ‘a radical turn’ in a plateauing postcolonial politics, looked upon bank nationalisation and privy purses abolition as having a ‘*symptomatic* significance’.¹² These colonial inheritances were jettisoned expediently and enthusiastically as a shot in arm for an emerging ‘paramount state’,¹³ eventuating in the Emergency of 1975; India’s British-style *democracy’s turning point*.¹⁴ Naturally, a substantial body of scholarship has studied the legal-constitutional aspects of these events, which clustered around British definitions of ‘property’, Indian understanding of ‘compensation’ and their determinations by the executive-in-parliament or the bench-in-court.¹⁵ These narratives around an individual (Indira Gandhi) and her inclinations,¹⁶ another (P.N. Haksar) and his

¹⁰ Paul M. McGarr, ‘After Nehru, What? Britain, the United States, and the Other Transfer of Power in India, 1960–64’, *The International History Review*, 33: 1 (2011), pp. 115–142.

¹¹ Guha, *India After Gandhi*, pp. 416–447.

¹² J. P. Lewis, ‘Wanted in India: A Relevant Radicalism’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5: 29/31 (1970), pp. 1211–1212.

¹³ G. Dhabhai, ‘Paramount State and the “Princely Subject”: Privy Purses Abolition and its Aftermath’, in Anupama Roy and Michael Becker (eds.) *Dimensions of Constitutional Democracy: India and Germany* (Singapore, 2020), pp. 169–182.

¹⁴ See G. Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (New Jersey, 2019).

¹⁵ See V.K. Ananth, *The Indian Constitution and Social Revolution: Right to Property since Independence* (New Delhi, 2015).

¹⁶ Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (London, 2001), pp. 287–347.

influences,¹⁷ and an institution (Congress Party) and its inconveniences,¹⁸ have framed this topic.

This article, in tracing the trajectory of the campaign against the privy purses and princely privileges from May 1967 to December 1971, when it climaxed in their de-recognition, is interested instead in populating this political history from an inter-national register to a provincial level. Secondly, it seeks to broaden the binary of the old/new party to an old/new *time* and situates the end of this British-bequeathed grant within this overlap. The article does so by drawing upon the documents of the well-informed British High Commission in New Delhi and supplementing it with relevant material. It was well-informed because it was well-involved and employing its vantage is interesting for it being the conduit, albeit reluctant, for the last Viceroy Lord Mountbatten's intervention,¹⁹ in this princely affair; a relic of the Raj that the latter – with his royal lineage – had transferred in 1947.²⁰ Thus, the High Commission was not simply an ex-colonial observer in postcolonial politics but a participant, with some 'informal influence' in this narrative, which brought to an end the 'first phase' of India's Eastminster's democracy,²¹ taking down one of its British residues.²²

Indeed, the larger British response (or lack of it) to the privy purse issue in India has been contextualised within royalties re-moulding themselves to post-1945 decolonisation, 'republicanism and radicalism'.²³ This adjustment resulted in an ambivalent de-

¹⁷ See Jairam Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives: P. N. Haksar and Indira Gandhi* (New Delhi, 2018).

¹⁸ See W.F. Kuracina, *The State and Governance in India: The Congress Ideal* (London, 2010).

¹⁹ See S.R. Ashton, 'Mountbatten, the royal family, and British influence in post-independence India and Burma', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33: 1 (2005), pp. 73–92.

²⁰ See Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (London, 1985).

²¹ James Manor, 'Parties and the Party System', in Atul Kohli (ed.) *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 63.

²² See Harshan Kumarasingham (ed.) *Constitution-making in Asia: Decolonisation and State-Building in the Aftermath of the British Empire* (London, 2016).

²³ See R. Aldrich and C. McCreery (eds.) *Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia* (Manchester, 2020).

institutionalised politics, with surviving spectres of kingship. Asian monarchies especially experienced an assortment of destinies, as the British (and other European powers) both abolished them viz. Ceylon (1813)/Burma (1885) and retained them e.g., the Malay sultanates.²⁴ Their subsequent histories therefore were about their pacifications and pretensions vis-à-vis the 19th c. colonial state and the rising nationalist tide(s) of 20th c.

There were princes in India prior to 1800, but it was the ‘British construction’ of their ‘indirect rule’ across the 1857 rebellion, which cemented their subsequent ‘aristocratic conservatism’.²⁵ British framework of ‘paramountcy’, which combined ‘practice and tradition...status and position’, ceremoniously ‘re-established’ the Indian princes, keeping them ‘separated from British India [as] ...almost passive agents’.²⁶ In a way, the abolition of their privy purses over 1967-71 ended the last vestiges of this separateness that they had maintained in the 1950s by either siding with the Congress or remaining ‘silent on political matters...’ or adopting ‘independent candidacies’ until the *Swatantra* Party (est. 1959) ‘tried to bring [them] ...in common cause [against] Congress “statism”’.²⁷ In the general elections of 1962 and 1967, *Swatantra* was the ‘second strongest party among the princely families [in] the states of Orissa and Gujarat’, while the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJS) emerged strongly in ‘Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan’.²⁸ Their ‘drift...away from the Congress was [also due] to the Jana Sangh’s Hindutva ideology’;²⁹ another pre-1947 legacy.

Emerging from ‘the post-mortem’ of 1967 Election

²⁴ Ibid. Chapter 1, ‘Monarchies, Decolonisation and Post-Colonial Asia’.

²⁵ See Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States*.

²⁶ Edward Thompson, *The Making of the Indian Princes* (London, 1978), p. vi.

²⁷ Howard L. Erdman, ‘Conservative Politics in India’, *Asian Survey*, 6: 6 (1966), p. 343, p. 346.

²⁸ Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, p. 538.

²⁹ Copland, ‘Crucibles of Hindutva?’, p. 231.

In February 1967, an electorate of 250 million reduced the Congress party to 281+ seats out of 521 in the lower house; a working majority of 45. Alongside, it made it taste defeat across ten states.³⁰ This was the Congress's worst showing since the 1937 elections and it was a veritable 'watershed' moment.³¹ After all, in the last five years, India had witnessed a border defeat and two military stand-offs, seen language riots and renewed regional politics, suppressed Naga-Mizo nationalism(s) having smothered Kashmiri self-determination, and was facing a large-scale famine.³² Ergo the Congress leadership gathered for three post-mortem sessions over April-June 1967. In the second of these, at a Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting, a note was circulated demanding bank nationalisation and the abolition of privy purses and princely privileges. While the conservative Deputy Prime Minister Morarji Desai opined this as 'too drastic', the British High Commissioner John Freeman noted that the CWC did decide that the government should do away with privileges like exemption from customs and immunity from arrest.³³

It was in the third of these post-mortem sessions, at an All-India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting, that a formal resolution calling for abolition got passed, somewhat surprisingly. Whereas the original draft had called only for the privileges to end, a last-minute amendment added the purses too.³⁴ This vote was spearheaded by members from the western state of Maharashtra. Its provincial Congress committee had met in Bombay earlier and passed several such 'socialist' resolutions, ignored by the English-language national press but not by the

³⁰ M.P. Singh and S.R. Raj, eds, *The Indian Political System* (Delhi, 2011), p. 257.

³¹ Rajni Kothari, 'India's Political Transition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2: 33/35 (1967), p. 1490. Stanley Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India: The Dynamics of One-Party Democracy* (New Jersey, 1968), p. 40.

³² See Guha, *India After Gandhi*, pp. 242–416.

³³ The National Archives (TNA). FCO 37/40. Freeman to CRO, 16 May 1967.

³⁴ TNA. FCO 37/41. AICC meeting, June 1967.

British Deputy High Commissioner there.³⁵ Now, in New Delhi, the watching John Freeman anticipated that:

This meeting of the AICC is of considerable significance...The delegates...could feel the breath of the electorate on their necks...and the High Command have emerged [with] their hands tied...Mrs Gandhi...said not one word for or against... [this] shifting to the left...³⁶

This despatch anticipated many of the acts of this longer-than-expected drama. First, with the princes playing an increasingly oppositional role, it was the Congress party that was keen on cutting them to size, while the government was ‘quite cautious’ to renounce treaty obligations from 1947.³⁷ Secondly, with the sums of their subsidies being small, compared to the amounts involved in bank nationalisation, it was the political capital that the party sought, with its professed socialism being at odds with the princes’ opulence. Third, it was neither Indira Gandhi nor P.N. Haksar but Home Minister Y.B. Chavan, who made the running on this issue, positioning himself vis-à-vis the Prime Minister and her Deputy Desai. His chosen vehicle of the ‘Young Turks’ represented old-wine-in-a-new-bottle as they were members of the Congress Forum for Socialist Action (CFSA) founded in 1962 by V.K. Krishna Menon; no less than ‘India’s Rasputin’ to the Anglo-Americans.³⁸ Fourth, the tremors along this trajectory to abolition – while felt in New Delhi and London – had their epicentre among the provinces, in the five ‘princely’ states among which one Congress government fell, another saw the party forced in a coalition, a third suffered desertions and two survived. Finally, this four-year period (1967-71) – an *in-between* time,³⁹ for Indian politics between the wars of 1962 and 1971 –

³⁵ TNA. FCO 37/44. Pease to Renwick, 25 July 1967.

³⁶ TNA. FCO 37/40. Freeman to CRO, 29 June 1967.

³⁷ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 112.

³⁸ See Paul M. McGarr, “‘India’s Rasputin’? V.K. Krishna Menon and Anglo–American misperceptions of Indian foreign policymaking, 1947–1964’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 22: 2 (2011), pp. 239–260.

³⁹ TNA. FCO 37/50. Renwick-Gujral talk, 30 June 1967.

would end with a treaty of peace, friendship, and cooperation with the Soviet Union, which was a decisive step out of the British Commonwealth that it had dwelt in hitherto.

For the princely rulers, that had been a world of constitutionally protected privy purses, guaranteed by the departing British, whose abolition was a ‘breach of trust’ amidst a politics of ‘slogans’.⁴⁰ They promptly approached the remaining personal guarantor from the 1947-48 trinity of Governor-General Mountbatten, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and States Minister Vallabhbhai Patel that had prevailed upon them to accept the privy purse as a *quid pro quo* for their accession into India. Mountbatten too considered the proposed abolition as ‘a breach of [his] undertaking’ and felt duty-bound ‘to make a personal appeal to Mrs Gandhi’, worrying the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) that was keen to ‘in no way associate themselves with [it]’, concerned of ‘the sensitive... relations with India’.⁴¹ These comprised British-Indian businesses, aid-loan-investment and the princely state of Sikkim, which was agitating ‘for a separate entry into the UN’,⁴² apart from the usual list of diplomatic disputes, and the CRO decided to warn Mountbatten against becoming ‘involved over princely privileges... which were the sole concern of Indians’,⁴³ arranged as they had been by the Indian government *after* independence, notwithstanding his delicate straddling of the viceregal/Governor-General divide over August 1947.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, in the last week of July 1967, Mountbatten called in the CRO, having been ‘approached’ by the Maharaja of Jaipur. When he expressed a desire to ‘write privately to Mrs Gandhi emphasising his own personal responsibility and her father’s reputation’, he was told

⁴⁰ TNA. FCO 37/44. Morarji Desai’s interview, 9 July 1967.

⁴¹ TNA. FCO 37/44. Hunt’s note, 3 August 1967.

⁴² TNA. FCO 37/44. Renwick to CRO, 25 July 1967.

⁴³ TNA. FCO 37/44. Renwick to CRO and Allinson to Garner, 25 July 1967.

⁴⁴ See Ian Copland, ‘Lord Mountbatten and the integration of the Indian states: A reappraisal’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21: 2 (1993), pp. 385–408.

that they ought to consult John Freeman. An ‘anxious’ Mountbatten reached out to Freeman thus: ‘Maharaja of Jaipur came to see me...Maharaja of Bikaner wrote to me...but for my relationship to the King and the trust they placed in me, they would never have accepted [privy purses]’.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Mountbatten also left two letters from the Maharaja of Jaipur, then-India’s Ambassador in Spain, for his wife and son, to be delivered by the High Commission! The Maharaja claimed that his mail was being opened and the CRO added to Freeman that ‘there was perhaps occasion for turning blind eyes’.⁴⁶ Faced with these missives, the High Commissioner, acknowledging Mountbatten’s ‘sense of personal honour’, was ‘ready to communicate his letter’ as an ‘act of courtesy’ but with the following passage deleted: ‘If the GoI, particularly a Congress party government, which gave their word to the original settlement, were now to break it, the damage to India’s good faith would be immeasurable...’.⁴⁷

John Freeman, a former left-wing Labour parliamentarian and editor of the *New Statesman*, was an ‘imaginative’ appointment in India, who would handle ‘the forging of a new relationship...conceived more as a partnership of equals...’ albeit ‘frustrated by [London’s] more ham-fisted approach to diplomacy’.⁴⁸ In 1965, while Britain had ‘mediated successfully’ in the first Indo-Pakistani clash over the Rann of Kutch, on the ensuing second Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir, it had ‘managed to alienate New Delhi’, leaving the Soviet Union to make peace with the Tashkent declaration.⁴⁹ It ‘might have been expected that Labour would not take kindly to these virtually irresponsible despots’ but the Labour governments, across 1947, had been rather keen ‘to uphold the sanctity of British treaties’ with New Delhi.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ TNA. FCO 37/44. Mountbatten to Freeman, 28 July 1967.

⁴⁶ TNA. FCO 37/44. CRO to Freeman, 26 July 1967.

⁴⁷ TNA. FCO 37/44. Freeman to Garner, 31 July 1967.

⁴⁸ Gavin Hyman, Freeman, John Horace (1915–2014), *ODNB*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.108185> (Accessed 18 July 2021).

⁴⁹ See Jonathan Colman, ‘Britain and the Indo-Pakistani Conflict: The Rann of Kutch and Kashmir, 1965’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37: 3 (2009), pp. 465–482.

⁵⁰ V.G. Kiernan, ‘India, and the Labour Party’, *New Left Review*, I/42 (1967), p. 55.

The question uppermost on everybody's mind was why the Home Minister was spearheading this attempt. The Deputy High Commissioner in Bombay reminded his colleagues that Chavan came of age politically in the princely states of Western India in the late-1940s. Before embarking upon his cabinet career in New Delhi in 1962, Chavan had been the last chief minister of the bilingual Bombay province and the first chief minister of its Marathi successor. In the 1967 general election, he was instrumental in getting a parliament ticket from Kolhapur for Lt. General (retd.) S.P.P. Thorat, the Sandhurst-trained veteran of the WWII Burma campaign, where the *Rajmata* of Kolhapur opposed Thorat and, despite Chavan's canvassing, defeated him. During the campaign, Chavan had made disparaging remarks about the *gaddi* [throne] of the princes, 'comparing it with an old mattress, which should be discarded'.⁵¹

Afterwards, Chavan 'became convinced that [for] social justice, the power of the princes which stemmed from their privy purses and the high esteem they command[ed] in their localities should be curbed', if needed, by an executive action.⁵² It was apparent this could only be pursued at the risk of an institutional split, if not an international smear and, within a month of its passing, the abolition of privy purses had become 'a resolution...equally difficult to implement or ignore',⁵³ with the Prime Minister's instincts inscrutable. It was being recalled that she had once called for it, at an AICC meeting in 1965. During the 1967 election campaign, she too had delivered 'a tirade against the princes' in Jaipur: 'If you look at their record...before Independence, you will find a big zero'.⁵⁴ As for their British patrons, she felt 'a lack of contact' with them. She saw the 'Britishers of [her] generation and earlier [as] prejudiced...because of their colonial memories but...the younger generation [as] perhaps

⁵¹ TNA. FCO 37/44. Pease to Renwick, 25 July 1967.

⁵² TV Kunhi Krishnan, *Chavan and the Troubled Decade* (Delhi, 1971), p. 164, p. 166.

⁵³ TNA. FCO 37/44. Pease to Renwick, 25 July 1967.

⁵⁴ TNA. FCO 37/44. Renwick to CRO, 25 July 1967.

merely bored with India’.⁵⁵ Within a month of her taking over the premiership in January 1966, Haksar, then India’s Deputy High Commissioner in London, had set out his disbelief in ‘the elaborate mythology...about our post-independence relationship with Britain’ thus: ‘Our becoming part of the Commonwealth saved us from the Cold War...Britain too derived benefits... [Now] ...we [must] develop direct relationship with the USA as we have developed with USSR’.⁵⁶

More recently though, her Ministry of External Affairs, headed by Dinesh Singh, Raja of Kalakankar, had advised her that to cancel the covenants concluded in 1947-48 would make the rulers of Sikkim and Bhutan less confident in the value of their similar treaties with New Delhi. This was in addition to the legal implications, which were time-consuming. More impetus seemed to be forthcoming from the left-opposition in the party and the parliament and riding the confidence of their backing, Chavan claimed that the Indian democracy could not straddle forever its contradictions of co-existence with a caste-ridden and status-bound society. In fact, the princes were to believe ‘as late as 1970’, that Indira Gandhi was either ‘weak’ or ‘being used by the Young Turks in the Congress’, but not that she was personally ‘out to get’ them.⁵⁷

In July 1967, mandarins in the Law Ministry told officials in the British High Commission ‘that the constitutional problems were so complex that...it might not be possible to assess all the implications...’ Their counterparts at the Home Ministry felt that the best solution was ‘to phase out the privy purses’, while declaring them ‘offices of profit’ to be ‘forfeited for election’.⁵⁸ With 9 prince MPs being members of the Congress party, this could be a solution.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 77.

⁵⁷ Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, p. 538.

⁵⁸ TNA. FCO 37/44. Freeman to CRO, 27 July 1967.

On 2 August 1967, Haksar dictated a note in which he pointed out that the AICC resolution called upon the government to ‘examine’ the question. That was being done at three ministries – Home, Finance and Law – and ‘until a definitive stage’ was reached, he would not ‘say anything’.⁵⁹ Two days later, Chavan hosted John Freeman for dinner and spoke with ‘disinterested contempt’ about the princes, bar Karan Singh of Kashmir, and affected an easy assumption on the passage of the abolition of their purses. Framing the issue widely as one of ‘popular egalitarianism’, he claimed that otherwise people ‘would turn to the Communists’.⁶⁰ At a time of the birth of the ‘Maoist movement in India’,⁶¹ Chavan was well-aware of the then-ongoing shifts across Asia towards such populism, with the West’s attendant anxieties.

By now, Freeman had received Mountbatten’s watered-down letter to Indira Gandhi. His simultaneous letter to the Maharaja of Jaipur also confirmed Mountbatten’s meetings with Sir Michael Adeane, private secretary to the Queen. He also wrote reassuringly to the Maharaja of Bikaner and the Maharao of Kutch.⁶² Forewarning Freeman of Mountbatten’s letter, the CRO had added that: ‘if the letters from Maharaja of Jaipur...caused any embarrassment...hope the occasion will not recur. But Mountbatten...is not [an] easy person to say “no” to’.⁶³ This business of ‘sending by hand of a Chancery Secretary the two letters from the Maharaja of Jaipur to his wife and son’ had the potential of metamorphosing into a major diplomatic row and Freeman decreed that henceforth his ‘High Commission should not be involved in any of the princely families’.⁶⁴ For the moment, he was delivering Mountbatten’s letter to Haksar on 10 August 1967. The shrewd secretary said that while he ‘fully understood’ London’s position,

⁵⁹ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ TNA/ FCO 37/32. Freeman-Chavan conversation, 4 August 1967.

⁶¹ See D.K. Gupta, ‘The Naxalites and the Maoist Movement in India: Birth, Demise, and Reincarnation’, *Democracy and Security*, 3: 2 (2007), pp. 157–188.

⁶² TNA. FCO 37/44. Mountbatten to Maharajas of Jaipur and Bikaner, 1 August 1967.

⁶³ TNA. FCO 37/44. Garner to Freeman, 7 August 1967.

⁶⁴ TNA. FCO 37/45. Waterfield to MacInnes, 8 August 1967.

he also ‘wondered’ if they had not ‘already compromised it by delivering such a letter’, especially if its ‘existence [became] known’.⁶⁵ The Prime Minister though accepted the letter ‘without rancour’, recognising Freeman as no more than ‘a postman’.⁶⁶

Simultaneously, almost twenty years to the day of Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘tryst with destiny’ speech, the aristocratic class that he had considered bogus but useful,⁶⁷ was preparing to take its last stand. On 12-13 August 1967, 59 princes convened in the national capital, under the chairmanship of the Maharaja of Baroda. The Nizam of Hyderabad did not attend but sent a message of support, nor did Karan Singh although his association was claimed. The conference constituted a committee to coordinate princely action and urged the Union Government to respect the *sacred* pledges of 1947. Disclaiming any inheritance from the colonial Chamber of Princes, this committee called itself a ‘trade union’,⁶⁸ but there was no distancing from colonial connections for this collaborator class with its ‘*international* friendship[s]’.⁶⁹

This all-India organisation called the ‘Rulers of Indian States in Concord for India’ subsequently established regional units, called ‘accords’, and set up an elaborate organisation comprising a 10-member ‘Ministrant Committee’, a larger ‘Conciliar Committee’, and the annual convention of 279 privy purse recipients.⁷⁰ Its unexpected intransigence made stark the choice in front of the government between abolition by their agreement or alienation of their support. Their willingness to marshal arguments reflecting upon ‘India’s *bona fides* [in]the world’, given their ‘persecution’ and ‘negotiation under pressure’, also intensified the

⁶⁵ TNA. FCO 37/45. Freeman to Garner, 10 August 1967.

⁶⁶ TNA. FCO 37/45. Freeman to Garner, 16 August 1967.

⁶⁷ See Manu Bhagavan, ‘Princely states and the making of modern India: Internationalism, constitutionalism and the postcolonial moment’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 46: 3 (2009), pp. 427–456.

⁶⁸ TNA. FCO 37/45. Renwick to CRO, 17 August 1967.

⁶⁹ W.L. Richter and Barbara N. Ramusack, ‘The Chamber and the Consultation: Changing Forms of Princely Association in India’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 34: 3 (1975), p. 760.

⁷⁰ Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, pp. 538–539.

symbolism involved.⁷¹ Any substantive *international* support however could only be pursued through diplomatic channels and Jai Singh, second son of the Maharaja of Jaipur, came to the British High Commission carrying three documents from 1947-48 that Mountbatten had ‘asked’ for.⁷² The CRO’s fears had to be now impressed upon Mountbatten:

Due to the delicate correspondence, great pains were taken by the HC not to disclose that our bag was being used... [This] was agreed to [as] these letters would undoubtedly have been intercepted by the Indian[s]...However, were [they] to learn of [this] ...the consequences would be grave.⁷³

By now, John Freeman was also having second thoughts about having personally delivered Mountbatten’s letter. He reflected that perhaps he ‘took too big a risk’ but the bigger risks were ‘the Jaipur letters and [those] to the various princes’ and their ‘intention...to use the High Commission as a continuing channel to Mountbatten’.⁷⁴ However, with Finance Minister Desai coming out in opposition to the Home Minister and less than half (114/281) of the MPs signing a memorandum demanding the implementation of the party’s ‘socialist’ resolutions, the Prime Minister was ‘advocating a go-slow policy’,⁷⁵ also in view of the complicated constitutional position.⁷⁶ The courses open to the Union Government were either legislating a bill into law or issuing an executive order, and neither were easy. In financial terms, the government paid a total of GBP 2.3 million a year tax-free, which amounted to 0.2 per cent of the annual budget.⁷⁷ A circumspect Prime Minister therefore presided on a cabinet meeting on 5 September 1967, which authorised Chavan to start negotiations with the ex-rulers for ‘abrogating’ their privileges and working out a ‘phased abolition’ of privy purses ‘without causing undue harm

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 539.

⁷² TNA. FCO 37/45. Strong to CRO, 13 August 1967.

⁷³ TNA. FCO 37/45. Atkinson’s note, 18 August 1967.

⁷⁴ TNA. FCO 37/45. Freeman to Garner, 18 August 1967.

⁷⁵ *Financial Times (FT)*, 13 August 1967.

⁷⁶ TNA. FCO 37/45. Renwick to CRO, 17 August 1967.

⁷⁷ *FT*, 24 August 1967.

to rulers...drawing small amounts'.⁷⁸ Her cautious secretary articulated the wisdom of this way thus:

In a country like ours where people are poor...privileges invite pointed attention...One can legislate. One can talk...privy purses of some run into lakhs, but there are [those] whose amount to...a few thousand rupees. My preference would be to solve it in a way which leaves the least amount of bitterness.⁷⁹

That this was a balancing act for buying time was made clear to the British High Commission officials by both sides of the Congress divide.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, on 2 September 1967, *March of the Nation*, a Bombay weekly, ran a front-page story titled 'Mountbatten suggests caution'.⁸¹ More embarrassing, however, for Freeman were the continuing pleas for support like those from Rao Govardhan Singh (legal adviser to the Rajmata of Partabgarh), who asked him 'whether Lord Mountbatten will be pleased to come over to India if recalled by the Rulers' or if 'a deputation of the Princes should meet HM Queen'.⁸² These indeed were the two domains that Mountbatten, being connected to both, bridged. Prompted by him, the Queen would ask about royals like the Maharaja and, later, the Maharani of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi. Her government would be at pains to emphasise that officially London had 'no standing to intervene in an internal affair of the Indian government concerning an Indian citizen'. Any 'informal initiative by a member of the Royal Family' was considered 'unlikely to do any good'.⁸³ Gayatri Devi had been an *Swatantra* MP since 1962. Her husband would pass away in 1970 while playing polo in Britain and Buckingham Palace was conscious of the royals' symbolic presence at the

⁷⁸ *HT*, 6 September 1967.

⁷⁹ Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). Subject File Serial No. 118. P.N. Haksar Papers (III Instalment). Haksar to Gandhi, 16 September 1967.

⁸⁰ TNA. FCO 37/33. Conversations with Patil and Gujral, 8 and 25 October 1967.

⁸¹ TNA. FCO 37/45. 1 September 1967.

⁸² TNA. FCO 37/45. Singh to Freeman, 26 August 1967.

⁸³ TNA. FCO 37/1594. O' Neill's note, 16 September 1975.

heart of the commonwealth, which though was increasingly problematic for British foreign policy with its former colonies by the 1960s.⁸⁴

By late-October 1967, the Home Ministry had worked out the ‘transitional allowances’ to be paid over two decades *in lieu* of privy purses. As regards privileges, it recommended abolishing the ‘ostentatious’ and curtailing the ‘ceremonial’. With respect to economic benefits, it recommended ‘exemption in central taxes but abolition of others...’ Here was a classic half-way house and now, the question for the Prime Minister was ‘in what precise way’ to build it, for the Home Ministry’s note argued ‘against executive decision’ and suggested ‘constitutional amendment’. However, Haksar considered it ‘essential [to] go through the process of negotiations...unless the princes prove to be intransigent’.⁸⁵

In early-November, Chavan spelled out these terms to his interlocutors who were rather relieved by his ‘assurance that the government would not act unilaterally’.⁸⁶ In these meetings, when one of the rulers said that ‘he could have understood...the step if a communist government had taken it’, Chavan replied that ‘what was involved was the principle that unearned incomes and hereditary privileges were inconsistent with democracy’ and, to that extent, ‘the decision was the result...of historical changes’.⁸⁷ On 3 July 1968, the Internal Affairs Committee of the union cabinet, presided over by the Prime Minister, approved the Home Ministry’s proposals for abolishing the privy purses and privileges ‘without causing undue hardship’. It decided to amend the relevant constitutional articles to avoid a tussle with the judiciary, being confident of the support of the communist, socialist, and Southern parties,

⁸⁴ See Philip Murphy, *Monarchy, and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2013).

⁸⁵ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 113.

⁸⁶ *HT*, 3 November 1967.

⁸⁷ Krishnan, *Chavan and the Troubled Decade*, p. 170.

to command the necessary 2/3rd majority in both houses of parliament. Simultaneously, Chavan was to consult with the princes for three more months on a ‘phased solution’ as below:

Princes drawing up to Rs. 30, 000 would get 12-times the amount, those receiving between Rs. 30, 000 and Rs. 100, 000, ten times and those receiving more than Rs. 100, 000, eight times... [It] would be free of tax. All their privileges would be abolished, but... [they would] be given protection against prosecution relating to their acts as rulers and accorded certain procedure[s] according to status and notions of society.⁸⁸

On their part, the princes were showing a disinclination to ‘to contemplate any alterations to the [status quo]’. There was ‘talk of their going to the courts’,⁸⁹ but they had certainly not gained any goodwill by refusing to face political reality. As Chavan rose in the parliament on 24 July 1968 to announce the cabinet’s decision, *The Times* headlined this news as ‘India to end privileges of princes...’⁹⁰ Some of the princes were headed to London as the Maharaja of Bikaner visited Mountbatten ‘to see whether [he] could [make] a last-minute appeal’.⁹¹ Mountbatten had been in correspondence with personalities as diverse as Robert McNamara, then-president of the World Bank, and C. Rajagopalachari, his successor as Governor-General in June 1948 and, an active opponent of the Congress since forming his party, *Swatantra*. In the general elections of 1967, it had won 44 seats and thus had a crucial position in the parliamentary vote on the constitutional amendment. Mountbatten urged McNamara to influence Desai,⁹² and reminded Rajagopalachari that ‘the balance of power’ rested with him.⁹³

⁸⁸ TNA. FCO 37/45. 12 July 1968.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *The Times*, 25 July 1968.

⁹¹ TNA. FCO 37/364. Mountbatten to Gore-Booth, 27 November 1968.

⁹² Ashton, ‘Mountbatten, the royal family, and British influence’, p. 78.

⁹³ TNA. FCO 37/364. Mountbatten-Rajagopalachari correspondence, November 1968.

Sir Morrice James, Freeman's successor in New Delhi, was quick to caution the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), CRO's successor in London, that as the scheme on privy purses was acceptable to 'Indian opinion (apart from *Swatantra* Party)', there was nothing to be done. James took strong exception to Mountbatten's letter to Rajagopalachari and termed it 'a direct interference in Indian internal affairs...'.⁹⁴ In January 1969, as controversy finally broke in the country on Mountbatten's August 1967 letter to Gandhi, James hastened to remind the FCO that 'it would cause irritation...to make any public *demarche*',⁹⁵ pointing out her terse reply to the persistent queries of what business has Lord Mountbatten to write: '*a lot of people* write to me'! In the FCO though, an odd official was starting to wonder whether Mountbatten's views – a voice of the past – and the princes' fate – a void of the present – were really 'likely to harm Indo-British relations ...' in the future?⁹⁶

Engulfed by the 1969 crisis and split

One year later, however, that future was still pending. In August 1969, responding to a parliamentary resolution demanding a timetable for abolition that had been unresolved, Y.B. Chavan issued the following statement, 'negotiations could not be conclusive [and] these things cannot be put into a straitjacket'.⁹⁷ The reason for Chavan's plea was the crisis in the Congress party in July 1969, following the dismissal of Morarji Desai as Finance Minister over the issue of nationalisation of 14 major banks. Next month, the party's candidate for India's Presidency was defeated, in a campaign orchestrated by Indira Gandhi, who supported the Vice-President's independent candidature.⁹⁸ These were the major milestones on the road to the Congress split

⁹⁴ TNA. FCO 37/364. James to Gore-Booth, 10 December 1968.

⁹⁵ TNA. FCO 37/364. James to Gore-Booth, 7 January 1969.

⁹⁶ TNA. FCO 37/364. O'Leary's note, 30 May 1969.

⁹⁷ TNA. FCO 37/364. Chavan's statement, 1 August 1969.

⁹⁸ TNA. FCO 37/362. 8 September 1969.

of November 1969.⁹⁹ They also meant though, as Karan Singh put it, that the Prime Minister needed ‘to cut privy purses...to keep up momentum’.¹⁰⁰

Haksar, however, continued to be cautious over ‘the manner of implementation and its timing’,¹⁰¹ and Foreign Secretary T.N. Kaul sought to assure the Western diplomatic corps in the capital that following bank nationalisation, ‘it was not likely that Mrs Gandhi would take any dramatic initiative in economic policy’.¹⁰² This reaffirmed their understanding of the privy purses issue as less an economic, and more a socio-political measure. The Congress split also affected the princes’ Concord, as ‘three quarters of the Congress princes sided with Indira Gandhi’s faction’, for they feared that her downfall might ‘unleash anarchy or communist power’. To that extent, they acquiesced in her necessity to assert – symbolically – her ‘socialist credentials [by] adherence to the ten-point programme’,¹⁰³ including abolition of privy purses and privileges.

On 8 April 1970, the union cabinet of the now-minority government of Congress (Ruling), supported from the outside by the left parties, finally decided, on the advice of its Law Ministry that there was no need to go to the Supreme Court to abolish privy purses. Next day, more than 40 Congress (R) MPs, former rulers and their supporters, addressed a letter to the Prime Minister seeking reconsideration of this ‘unjust’ decision. This was responded to by over 50 Congress (R) MPs urging her ‘not to be deflected from her commitment to abolish...’.¹⁰⁴ This divide led *The Times* to declare that ‘Mrs Gandhi faces desertion by her left-wing allies’.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ See R.L. Hardgrave Jr., ‘The Congress in India -- Crisis and Split’, *Asian Survey*, 10: 2 (1970), pp. 256–262.

¹⁰⁰ TNA. FCO 37/362. Talk with Karan Singh, 7 August 1969.

¹⁰¹ NMML. Subject File Serial No. 141. Haksar Papers (III Instalment). Haksar to Gandhi, 4 August 1969.

¹⁰² TNA. FCO 37/404. Conversation with Kaul, 26 August 1969.

¹⁰³ Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, pp. 538–539.

¹⁰⁴ TNA. FCO 37/594. 27 April 1970.

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, 4 May 1970.

The field where this desertion was to be feared most was the parliament's budget session in spring 1970, in which the minority government re-introduced successfully the second bank nationalisation bill with 'compensation...to the affected shareholders',¹⁰⁶ but balked at the promised bill on privy purses. The government's fears centred as much around abstentions within the ruling party as challenge from the opposition. The scene was thus set for a summer lobbying as it was clear that the present pattern of ruling by the Congress (R) – 'a mixture of radical titbits for the left, counterbalancing titbits for the right' – could not continue.¹⁰⁷

By August 1970, the economic radicalism that had seen bank nationalisation seemed tempered. In her Independence Day speech, Indira Gandhi spoke about 'a balance with the private sector' and as this shift in emphasis became visible in the fourth 5-year plan, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) withdrew its parliamentary support to her government. By now, the Prime Minister, also holding the portfolio of Home Ministry, was 'busy discussing the issue with the princes in the hope of an amicable agreement'.¹⁰⁸ Against this background, when the legislative denouement came, it was surprisingly swift. On 1 September 1970, without much public notice or press fanfare, Indira Gandhi introduced the constitution amendment bill to abolish privy purses and princely privileges in the lower house.

The Prime Minister's motives seemed related first, to the then-ongoing 'land grab' movement indulged in by her party's left-wing as well as her left allies. Apart from Naxalbari (West Bengal),¹⁰⁹ the areas affected included the erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Cochin,

¹⁰⁶ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁷ TNA. FCO 37/594. 27 May 1970.

¹⁰⁸ TNA. FCO 37/594. 21 August 1970.

¹⁰⁹ See Bernard D' Mello, *India after Naxalbari: Unfinished History* (New York, 2018).

along with Malabar (Madras/TN), and eastern UP and Bihar with their feudatories,¹¹⁰ and ‘the government gave every appearance of being pushed into action by the Congress Left and the Leftist parties’.¹¹¹ Second, there were murmurs that ‘she would go to the country if the bill is defeated’, reflecting both the usefulness of ‘such a defeat as an election issue’ and the fact that as Home Minister, this was now her bill and its successful passage could only strengthen her.¹¹² In the event, the bill got passed in the lower house by 336 to 155 votes. It was in the upper house that on 5 September, the bill was defeated by 149 votes for and 75 against. As the number of members present and voting was 224, the 2/3rd majority required was 149.33. The bill was thus defeated by 1/3rd of a vote! Two days later, now-Finance Minister Chavan told a disbelieving parliament that ‘the President [had] decided to *de-recognise* all the rulers...’ Sweetening the bitter pill, he added that the government would still make ‘transitional’ arrangements for them.¹¹³ What had happened to turn abolition into de-recognition? A note by Haksar to the Prime Minister dated 5 September 1970 ‘justified’ the ‘decisive’ turn thus: ‘The President has the unquestioned power to de-recognise...There is widespread support in the country for putting an end to an antiquated system...’¹¹⁴

These insider views of the Indian official chimed in with the outsider thoughts of the British High Commissioner, Morrice James, on what Indira Gandhi had described as ‘a step in the particular direction in which the country wants to go’.¹¹⁵ Abolition was of interest in political, constitutional, and historical terms and she had argued that the 1947 British dominion covenants were ‘not contracts with individuals but political settlements’, which preceded the

¹¹⁰ See Joseph Tharamangalam, ‘The communist movement and the theory and practice of peasant mobilization in South India’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 11: 4 (1981), pp. 487–498 and Rajendra Singh, ‘Agrarian Social Structure and Peasant Unrest: A Study of Land-Grab Movement in District Basti, East U. P.’, *Sociological Bulletin*, 23: 1 (1974), pp. 44–70.

¹¹¹ Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, p. 539.

¹¹² TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 2 September 1970.

¹¹³ TNA. FCO 37/599. 7 September 1970.

¹¹⁴ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, pp. 185–186.

¹¹⁵ TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 11 September 1970. This and the next paragraph draw upon this letter.

1950 Indian constitution, and therefore it was possible to abolish them. Insisting that in the government's opinion, privy purse was 'not property [for] compensation', but it was prepared to provide for 'some means...' to help the rulers, she had concluded with her starting theme of making the constitution 'serve...the Indian people'.

The bargaining chip of 1947-50 had thus been cashiered in 1967-70 and, with the alienation of the princes holding no political or territorial terrors for New Delhi, it was a question of mopping up the legislative and legal aspects. Given the strengths of the parties in the upper house, following its last biennial election in March 1970, the Prime Minister knew that she would have 'difficulty' obtaining a 2/3rd majority there but, afterwards, there was little doubt among observers that had 'all members...been present, the bill would have been passed'. The consequent presidential order de-recognising the princes gave rise to three kinds of controversy, all of which were ominous broadly, as they concerned *Eastminster* cabinet procedure, contempt of parliament and presidential power to de-recognise royalty. There was the matter of the speed with which the presidential order had followed. The more important questions however, which the Prime Minister herself asked Haksar, were, could there still be any 'agreement' and would that be 'politically wise'?¹¹⁶

Even more significant was her willingness to override the parliamentary process, which called for a re-introduction of the bill in a special session. This was what Jawaharlal Nehru had done in 1964, in similar circumstances. For Chavan to describe the parliamentary defeat as 'technical' was an illustration of the 'cavalier attitude' of this government, to Morrice James. Last but not the least was the question uppermost on the minds of the princes that as there was no 'specific provision for de-recognition', could the executive's right to *de-recognise*, hitherto

¹¹⁶ NMML. Subject File Serial No. 191. Haksar Papers (III Instalment). Gandhi's note, Undated/handwritten.

accepted as implicit only in individual cases, be exercised in this ‘blanket manner’? With the princes preparing to take their case to the judiciary, for the High Commissioner, ‘Mrs Gandhi [had] ridden roughshod not only over a *past* governmental commitment but over the democratic process, parliamentary decision, and the spirit and perhaps even the letter of the constitution’;¹¹⁷ in other words, over a very *Westminster* world.

If this was the diplomatic reasoning, what was the reception of these events in the contemporary British press? Writing for *The Guardian*, Inder Malhotra reckoned that the Prime Minister ‘did not want...unnecessary delay’ given the bill’s ‘massive majority’ in both houses.¹¹⁸ In response, *The Times* quoted the Maharaja of Bikaner declaring that ‘the next round would be fought in the Supreme Court’. In turn, Chavan brought up the left parties’ objection to the proposed ‘transitional relief’ to the princes, as they had already ‘received GBP 50 million since 1947’.¹¹⁹ *The Economist* held privy purses as the reason for India having avoided ‘either a bloodshed or balkanisation’ then and reasoned that now that princes ‘no longer do the ruling, their privileges...look like luxuries in a poor country’. It held their abolition as the price of the support from ‘her communist allies’ that Indira Gandhi needed, to have this parliamentary left help her take on ‘the communist guerrillas, the Naxalites’. It understood the technique used, for ‘the defeat was so narrow that the executive order cannot be described as a flat contradiction of the will of parliament’.¹²⁰ It was in *The Scotsman* that Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, asking the question ‘How purse-less Princes will make out?’, pointed out that ‘princes without purses will not become paupers but their pensioners/dependents...might’.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 11 September 1970.

¹¹⁸ *The Guardian*, 7 September 1970.

¹¹⁹ *The Times*, 8 September 1970.

¹²⁰ *The Economist*, 12 September 1970.

¹²¹ *The Scotsman*, 17 September 1970. On this, see Priya Naik, ‘All the king’s men: regal ministers of eclipsed empires’, in Aldrich and McCreery (eds.) *Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia*.

In political terms, the first casualties were those 7 ex-rulers, then-Congress MPs, who had voted against the bill. Of the 2 who did not, the notable name was that of Karan Singh of Kashmir. Given these numbers, the Congress (R) had estimated that it would gain more from socialist radicals than it would lose from princely sycophants, some of whom were heading to Britain. In September 1970, the Maharao of Kutch approached Mountbatten claiming that he could ‘no longer live in Kutch, where [his reduced] status of a private citizen will [lead] to harassment’. Recalling that his ‘house [had] always been loyal to the Crown’, he plaintively asked if it ‘would be possible for [him] to acquire British citizenship or permission to reside permanently [there]?’¹²² The FCO officials weighed the implications of this request, the answer to which was that ‘provided the Maharao has funds, he [could] stay and, after five years, apply for British nationality’. But there were two clouds on the horizon: one, the then-imminent immigration act of 1971 that was expected to ‘make the situation more difficult’ for cases like these, and two, that this might be ‘the first of many requests’ and necessitated a ‘general policy’.¹²³ It was considered ‘not unlikely that other dispossessed rulers may appeal’ to Mountbatten or that ‘he has already [not] been active on their behalf’.¹²⁴ After all, he still considered himself ‘the Ombudsman for the Indian Princes’.¹²⁵

Endgames in the 1970 Supreme Court and the 1971 General Election

On 14 October 1970, a special bench of 11 judges of the Supreme Court, headed by the Chief Justice Mohammad Hidayatullah, started hearing the petition filed by the Maharaja of Gwalior and others, challenging the constitutional validity of the presidential order. This too was a very British world, with the Trinity, Cambridge and Lincoln’s Inn educated Hidayatullah, one of

¹²² TNA. FCO 37/599. Singh to Mountbatten, 8 September 1970.

¹²³ TNA. FCO 37/599. Birch’s note, 14 September 1970.

¹²⁴ TNA. FCO 37/599. Sutherland’s note, 18 September 1970.

¹²⁵ Ashton, ‘Mountbatten, the royal family, and British influence’, p. 78.

whose civil servant brothers had been a two-time Foreign Secretary of Pakistan! The High Commission's officials found the corridors of power in New Delhi abuzz with

...ideas of the PM's extravagant colleagues to use a decision for the princes...to mount an electoral campaign, victory in which might be interpreted as a mandate to rewrite the constitution...not [considered] democratic since the Constituent Assembly which drew it up was elected upon a restricted franchise [in 1945-6] covering less than 20%...¹²⁶

That there was little popular support for the princes was clear; equally though, it seemed that it was their privileges that animated people. When in November 1970, Robert Cormack – future British Ambassador to Congo and Sweden – visited Jaipur, he was told by the Rajasthan Finance Minister that ‘he did not mind if the princes were compensated...but it was intolerable that they should be a super class of citizen’, adding that he hoped the court would ‘interpret the law in the spirit of the will of the people’. In the event, on 15 December 1970, the judges ‘by a majority of 9:2 found for the princes...’¹²⁷ The government's case was that the covenants with the rulers in 1947 were political documents, which recreated *imperial* paramountcy post-independence and, therefore, depended ‘on the willingness of the government’. Neither was the payment of privy purses a ‘legal obligation’ nor was the court competent to hear disputes relating to them. These claims were dismissed by the judges, who held that British ‘paramountcy lapsed on 15 August 1947 and did not devolve on the [Indian] President’. Therefore, the presidential order had no validity and the court found it ‘a clear infringement of [princes'] Fundamental Rights’. Secondly, ‘to withdraw [princely] recognition *en masse* was wholly outside’ the scope of the rights of the President and, third, the bar to the jurisdiction of the court did not apply to the privy purses.

¹²⁶ TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 19 November 1970.

¹²⁷ TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 15 December 1970.

With the legal circle thus squared, the ball was back in the political court of the Prime Minister. She was keeping her own counsel in the face of characteristic cries from the left ‘for the recreation of a Constituent Assembly to amend sections of the constitution dealing with Fundamental Rights...’¹²⁸ Politically speaking, it did appear ‘a little odd’ that parliament should have no power ‘even by due process to amend the constitution’. A third way pointed back to negotiations with the princes most of whom, the High Commission was told, believed that they had ‘come to the end of the line’. The court’s judgement had been a shot in their arm and one possibility was for them to ‘voluntarily give up privileges in return for compensation’ for their purses. Even the union cabinet had been ‘discussing the quantum of compensation’. Whatever happened, one thing was clear: ‘Twice [in 1970], first over bank nationalisation and now over privy purses, Mrs Gandhi [had] shown disregard...for the parliamentary process...Twice she [was] brought up sharply by the Court’. Murmurings were growing about ‘Mrs Gandhi’s hankering, shared by many of her advisers, for a greater measure of authoritarianism’.

Y.B. Chavan, ‘who had championed the cause of abolishing...more consistently than [most], felt that the game was lost’. However, he maintained that ‘the measure had the approval of the nation, and that the verdict of the Court was not the last word’.¹²⁹ Pointing out that in 9 by-elections held across 4 different states, after the split in the Congress, Gandhi’s party had won 5/7 seats contested, Chavan called it an ‘indication of the direction in which the wind was blowing’ and called for ‘early elections so that party could take advantage of [this] psychological shift’.¹³⁰ On 27 December 1970, the Prime Minister duly announced that

¹²⁸ TNA. FCO 37/599. James to FCO, 21 December 1970. The rest of this paragraph draws upon this note.

¹²⁹ Krishnan, *Chavan and the Troubled Decade*, p. 176.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

‘elections to the *Lok Sabha* due in 1972...would be held in early-1971’;¹³¹ the first-ever mid-term polls in India with ‘more of a plebiscitary character than any previous election’.¹³² The scene was set for her ‘*Garibi hatao*’ [remove poverty] campaign, at the end of which, as the *Financial Times* headline said on 6 March 1971, ‘Mrs Gandhi holds the Centre’. For the first time since 1951 ‘more Princes lost than won’,¹³³ and overall, they were now at the ‘government’s mercy’.¹³⁴ As they had done in the past, ‘the princes turned to Britain’,¹³⁵ specifically to Mountbatten, who again appealed to her ‘to be generous’, adding that her father ‘would have approved of [it]’.¹³⁶ He was cautiously hopeful in his communication with the Maharaja of Bikaner that he had ‘continued to help...but [had] to be careful not to come out into the open as this proved counterproductive’.¹³⁷

Mountbatten had been passing on princely approaches about ‘their prospects of settling in Britain to Buckingham Palace, which in turn sought clarification from the [FCO]. The answer...was that the princes’ titles might be acknowledged in private [as] some...had British titles [but] dual nationality was out of the question [as] India did not recognise it’.¹³⁸ If any Conservative plans for ‘Princely Ulster’s in India did not come off in 1947 because of, among other reasons, ‘something to the impossibility of basing a campaign at Westminster on the obscure rights of the feudal, alien princes’,¹³⁹ then their privy purses could hardly be salvaged now from that vantage.

¹³¹ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, pp. 186–87.

¹³² Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, p. 540.

¹³³ Harish Khare, ‘Restructuring of Values: Princes in 1971 Elections’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15: 4 (1973), p. 413.

¹³⁴ TNA. FCO 37/812. March 1971.

¹³⁵ Ashton, ‘Mountbatten, the royal family, and British influence in post-independence India and Burma’, p. 77.

¹³⁶ Hartley Library (HL), University of Southampton. MB1/K146. Mountbatten Papers. Mountbatten to Gandhi, 22 March 1971.

¹³⁷ HL. MB1/K26. Mountbatten Papers. Mountbatten to Singh, 22 April 1971.

¹³⁸ Ashton, ‘Mountbatten, the royal family, and British influence in post-independence India and Burma’, p. 79.

¹³⁹ Nicholas Owen, ‘The Conservative Party and Indian Independence, 1945-1947’, *The Historical Journal*, 46: 2 (2003), p. 429, p. 432.

Instead, on 9 August 1971, the day her Ambassador in Moscow signed the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty, Indira Gandhi tabled the Constitution (26th) Amendment Bill to abolish privy purses and privileges in the parliament.¹⁴⁰ She was ready to discard this ‘fifth wheel of colonialism’.¹⁴¹ By December 1971, when the Indian army was marching on to Dhaka in the Bangladesh war, this abolition was ‘no longer a political issue’.¹⁴² Its appeal had eroded so much that no compensation was provided for in the new bill and yet the debate in the parliament was ‘flat’ on precisely the point on which the court had struck down the original order. The bill became law on 28 December 1971 capping ‘Indira Gandhi’s year’.¹⁴³ In December 1972, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto would follow her lead and issue his own presidential order abolishing the privy purses and privileges of the rulers of states acceding to Pakistan in 1947.¹⁴⁴ In May 1975, her government would also abolish the rule of the Chogyal (monarch) of Sikkim, making it India’s 22nd state, from being a ‘British protectorate since 1861’ and enjoying a special relationship ‘under the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950’, in another case of ‘internal affairs’ for the FCO.¹⁴⁵

Even when she would be ousted from office in 1977, by a combination of Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan’s call for ‘total revolution’ and her response of imposing an emergency, the successor Janata Party government would not repeal the abolition, instead amending the fundamental right to private property.¹⁴⁶ As for the princes, they would endure in the public imagination/media as ‘symbols of regional identity and *rajadharmā*’, and in electoral

¹⁴⁰ TNA. FCO 37/814. 9 August 1971.

¹⁴¹ Khare, ‘Restructuring of Values’, p. 408.

¹⁴² TNA. FCO 37/814. 10 December 1971.

¹⁴³ TNA. FCO 37/1093. 10 January 1972.

¹⁴⁴ TNA. FCO 37/1335. 31 December 1972.

¹⁴⁵ TNA. FCO 37/1534. Mountbatten-Brimelow correspondence, 1 and 13 November 1974. TNA. FCO 37/1672. Deas to Stitt, 16 January 1975.

¹⁴⁶ See Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles* and Ananth, *The Indian Constitution and Social Revolution*.

politics/governance, apart from continuing to offer a ‘fantasy for post-modern consumption’.¹⁴⁷ The arc of their *afterlife*, from losing ‘regal privileges and privy purses’ to the consequent conversion of ‘their palaces into hotels’, was accompanied by their ‘popular...depiction on a logo [of] Air India [whose] *maharaja* was presented as a likeable and humorous persona’!¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Across Asia today, there remain some monarchs with their spectacles, while the memories of others live on, sometimes in the diaspora – like those of Maharaja Ranjit and Dalip Singh among Sikhs in Britain. Royal legacies linger in diverse trails, especially for the British-maintained rulers beyond South Asia, like in Malaysia (1963) and Brunei (1984), but all show a refashioning of public *roles*. Their narratives from the ‘endgame’ of empire saw first, ‘willing or coerced acquiescence’, then a ‘cessation’ of their sovereignty with caveats/guarantees and lastly, with ‘heightened national sentiment’, the end of their ‘privileges’, leaving them as nostalgic ‘founts of ceremonies...’ or exotic ‘sites of heritage’.¹⁴⁹

In this corpus, the abolition of privy purses in India was an exercise in ending a remnant of the Raj, within a wider inter-generational *transition*. This article has traced the response of the ruling Congress Party and government, between 1967 and 1971 with a split in the middle, in the hope to highlight an internal politics from decolonisation that impinged upon inter-governmental relations, while being emblematic of an era of decline of British *informal*

¹⁴⁷ Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States*, p. 278. Richter, ‘Princes in Indian Politics’, p. 541.

¹⁴⁸ See Jim Masselos, ‘Decolonised rulers Rajas, maharajas and others in post-colonial India’, in Aldrich and McCreery (eds.) *Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia*.

¹⁴⁹ See Aldrich and McCreery, ‘Monarchies, Decolonisation and Post-Colonial Asia’, in their (eds.) *Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia*.

influence in Indian political circles. There was little leverage or desire left, by 1971, in London's relationship with New Delhi, to stop its 'breakwaters' of 1857 from being emptied.

These cultural symbols of British rule in India were sustained by a colonial financial set-up and its curtailment was thus a moment of *passage* into contemporary politics. In the late-1960s, this removal of purses and privileges associated with the old regime served as a barometer for re-fashioning loyalty to a new Congress, as nationalist leaders targeted them for personal desire and political dividend. The efforts to end these psychological inheritances were, however, less a crucible of a substantial skirmish and more a measure of symbolic socialism, in which *Indira's India* was to be ushered in, papering over this Nehruvian fault-line.

Instead of being swept away in the late-1940s, princely India was offered a sweet deal over opposition from socialist and communist parties. From the mid-1960s however, Congress party/government felt pressure to cut down these imperial leftovers, given their increasing patronage of the right-wing opposition. Internationally, there was a sense that the princes would call upon the British government and personalities like Mountbatten and open another front in the strained Indo-British relations of the post-Nehru era. After all, they had been an integral part of the empire's force and facade. Afterwards though, Britain's *New Commonwealth* relationship with the Indian Union had seen paramountcy being assailed by accession, whose swallowing was made easier with purses, perks, and privileges.

This had maintained a patina, shaping perceptions like those by successive British Prime Ministers in the 1950s-60s that 'in so far as any country from the West can exercise influence [in India] ...the task...lies upon us', as things in India appeared to be still done 'according to

the old style’.¹⁵⁰ That *continuum* was pierced through after Nehru, as everything from British symbols to these buffer princes were taken down across the country in a ‘leftward turn’.¹⁵¹ They had been co-opted in 1947-48 but now the Congress state struck at their lifestyle, less for an economic rationale and more for political, socio-cultural reasons. British ‘official’ discretion and Indian disdain confirmed an overlapping understanding that this dimension of their shared past might imperil future relations. From London’s perspective, the princes were not such actors anymore, for whom it would stake prestige or could wield support. The mixed and mingled nature of their post-1947 relations had run the course of that *transfer of power* as a post-colonial generation shed yet another of the colonial skins of British India.

¹⁵⁰ TNA. CAB 129/78. 15 November 1955. TNA. CAB 129/93. 4 June 1958.

¹⁵¹ See McGarr, ‘The Viceroys and Disappearing from the Roundabouts in Delhi’.