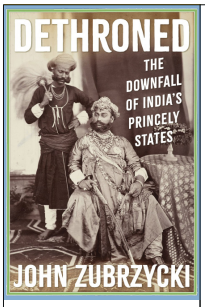

Dethroned: The Downfall of India's Princely States
John Zubrzycki (Hurst, £25)

Marshalling India's maharajahs

Richard Hopton

THE COMING OF INDIA'S independence in 1947 was an upheaval of immense historical significance. It ended more than two centuries of British rule and created the world's largest democracy. That it is still so controversial is largely the result of the human catastrophe which accompanied the partition of British India, what the historian John Keay has called the "vivisection of a subcontinent".

Perhaps ten million people fled for their lives in both directions, east and west, the greatest exodus in human history. In the process, at least a million people died in a tsunami of sectarian violence, though the true number will never be known.

Although the creation of two new nation states, India and Pakistan, usually dominates any discussion of Indian independence, there were other important elements at work. One of these was the question of how to deal with British India's princely states. If the severing of Partition created two new nations, the issue of the princely states concerned the geographic and political integrity of these new nations.

On modern maps, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are clearly defined (with the exception of Kashmir) as complete, territorially and politically cohesive entities without exceptions or derogations. But in 1947, this was by no means a foregone conclusion. How this problem was overcome is the subject of John Zubrzycki's latest book, a story he tells compellingly, in fluent, unflashy prose.

The Maharajah of Travancore

BY THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, there were 562 princely states in British India (though estimates of their number vary), whose rulers controlled two fifths of India's land mass and one third of her population. The states varied enormously in size and wealth: Hyderabad extended to more than 82,600 square miles with 16 million inhabitants and had an "income and expenditure [which] rivalled that of Belgium and in 1947 was larger than that of 20 members of the UN".

At the other end of the scale, there were more than 300 micro states, with tiny populations and almost non-existent incomes. Bilbari, with an area of 1.6 square miles, had a population of 27. Nonetheless, as Zubrzycki writes, "Regardless of the size of their states, India's princes were the final source of all authority, their actions never questioned by judiciaries or elected legislative bodies."

Taken together, the states formed a random patchwork within what would become India and Pakistan. India's founding fathers feared that unless the states could be persuaded to accede to the new nation, it would become Balkanised, its geographic integrity compromised.

Moreover, although some states had made progress towards democracy and economic development, the vast majority — especially the smaller ones — were regarded by the Indian nationalists of Congress as sinks of feudal autocracy, anachronisms in a modern, forward-looking democracy. *Dethroned* tells the story of how the states were corralled, most of them in a period of only a few weeks in the summer of 1947, into the new nations of India and Pakistan.

IN CHARGE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN independent India and the princely states was Vallabhbhai Patel, head of the recently-formed States Department of the interim Indian government. Patel was a formidable politician, the most powerful figure in the Congress party after Nehru. One western journalist writing shortly after Independence, described Patel's treatment of the princes as being like "a Hindu Cromwell courteously decapitating hundreds of little King Charleses."

Patel's right-hand man was V.P. Menon, a senior civil servant "with a penchant for Savile Row suits, Cuban cigars and slate-blue Cadillacs." The responsibility of persuading the princes to accede to independent India was given to the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten.

He was the ideal man for the job. As Menon said, "Apart from his position, his grace and his gifts, his relationship to the Royal Family was bound to influence the rulers." He also knew many of the princes personally, counting the Maharajas of Bikaner and Jaipur and the Nawab of Bhopal among his close friends.

It was decided that the princes should be asked to sign an Instrument of Accession ceding to the new government of India their powers over defence, external affairs and communications — the railways, roads, and telephone lines which criss-crossed India. Everything else would remain within the princes' jurisdiction.

The problem for Patel, Menon, and Mountbatten lay in the legal fact that Paramountcy, the power which governed the relations between the British Raj and the princely states, would lapse at Independence, rather

HISTORIC COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By the end of the Second World War there were 562 princely states in British India. The princes were final sources of authority, never questioned by judiciaries or elected bodies

than be transferred to the new republic. This meant, at least in theory, that the princely states would become independent entities, apart from the matters specified in the Instrument of Accession, at Independence.

For the vast majority of states this was simply not practical: they were too small and too poor to function independently. But for the rulers of some of the larger, more prosperous states, it was a beguiling prospect.

TRAVANCORE, A LARGE STATE OF SIX million inhabitants and rich resources on India's south-west coast, was the first to fly the independence kite. Other states, some of them well within the borders of the new India, also flirted with independence or with acceding to Pakistan, including Bhopal, Jodhpur, Dholpur, Bilaspur, Gwalior, and Rampur, but none followed it through.

By 15 August 1947, the vast majority of states had acceded to either India or Pakistan; only Junagadh, Hyderabad, and Kashmir stood apart. Junagadh was occupied by a battalion of Indian troops on 9 November; Hyderabad held out for longer but in September 1948 was overwhelmed by the Indian army in the euphemistically styled "Police Action".

Estimates of the number of people, mostly Muslims, killed during the invasion vary from 30,000 up to 200,000. Whatever the truth, as Zubrzycki writes, "The killing of Muslims in Hyderabad remains the single largest massacre in the history of independent India." Kashmir's trauma, by contrast, continues to this day.

From here, Zubrzycki continues the story of the princes and their states through the process of integration into independent India. As a *douceur* for giving up their hereditary powers and wealth, the princes were granted a government pension — a privy purse — and allowed to retain certain privileges. These were abolished by Mrs Gandhi in 1971 in controversial circumstances. The princes were henceforth ordinary private citizens.

Dethroned is a full, even-handed account of the political and constitutional saga of the princely states. Zubrzycki does not allow nostalgia for a gilded past to creep in: "As the curtain began to come down on the Indian empire … the princes were their own worse enemies." Likewise, he recognises that the tactics, strong-arm and otherwise, used against the states by Patel and Menon were justified by their overarching object of creating a cohesive, modern, and democratic India. "Their appeal to the rulers and to their subjects alike," he writes, "was to work in the cause of national unity and stability. In the vast majority of cases, it worked." ●

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