

# **THE SABOTEUR AND HIS CONFEDERACY PLAN**

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**Sandeep Bamzai**

## Abstract

Jawaharlal Nehru was clear with his idea of India: an Undivided India which included the Provinces under British Rule and the amorphous mass of small and big Princely States, which did not desire to be part of such an idea of 'India'. In his battle to subjugate the Princes, Nehru found an ally in the last Viceroy Lord Louis Mountbatten sent by the new British Prime Minister Clement Attlee. The implementation was then run like a relay race where the baton was handed over first to Sardar Patel, and then to his able lieutenant, V P Menon, once the States Ministry was formed. The duo tirelessly brought in the errant states, reorganised them on linguistic and regional lines, and gave flesh to the Nehruvian Ideal of an Undivided India. This report uses confidential documents bequeathed to the author by his grandfather who was a close aide of both Sheikh Abdullah and Nehru, to give a close-in view of the Great Game of the Indian Princes who wanted to create their own Confederation.

# Introduction

**O**n 20 February 1947, the head of the post-War Labour government in Britain, Prime Minister Clement Attlee, announced in an address to the British Parliament that his government intended to withdraw all its military forces and government officials from India.

*“I desire to make a statement on Indian policy.*

*It has long been the policy of successive British governments to work toward the realisation of self-government in India. In pursuance of this policy, an increasing measure of responsibility has been devolved on Indians and today the civil administration and the Indian Armed Forces rely to a very large extent on Indian civilians and officers. In the constitutional field the Acts of 1919 and 1935 passed by the British Parliament each represented a substantial transfer of political power. In 1940 the coalition government recognised the principle that Indians should themselves frame a new constitution for a fully autonomous India, and in the offer of 1942 they invited them to set up a Constituent Assembly for this purpose as soon as the war was over.*

*His Majesty's Government believe this policy to have been right and in accordance with sound democratic principles. Since they came into office, they have done their utmost to carry it forward to its fulfilment. The declaration of the prime minister of 15 March last, which met with general approval in Parliament and the country, made it clear that it was for the Indian people themselves to choose their future status and constitution and that in the opinion of His Majesty's Government the time had come for responsibility for the government of India to pass into Indian hands.*

*It is with great regret that His Majesty's Government find that there are still differences among Indian parties which are preventing the Constituent Assembly from functioning as it was*

*intended that it should. It is of the essence of the plan that the Assembly should be fully representative.*

*His Majesty's Government desire to hand over responsibility to authorities established by a constitution approved by all parties in India in accordance with the Cabinet Mission's plan, but unfortunately there is at present no clear prospect that such a constitution and such authorities will emerge. The present state of uncertainty is fraught with danger and cannot be indefinitely prolonged. His Majesty's Government wish to make it clear that it is their definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transference of power into Indian hands by a date not later than June 1948.*

*This great sub-continent now containing over 400 million people has for the last century enjoyed peace and security as a part of the British Commonwealth and Empire. Continued peace and security are more than ever necessary today if the full possibilities of economic development are to be realised and a higher standard of life attained by the Indian people.*

*His Majesty's Government are anxious to hand over their responsibilities to a government which, resting on the sure foundation of the support of the people, is capable of maintaining peace and administering India with justice and efficiency. It is therefore essential that all parties should sink their differences in order that they be ready to shoulder the great responsibilities which will come to them next year.*

*His Majesty's Government believe that British commercial and industrial interests in India can look forward to a fair field for their enterprise under the new conditions. The commercial connection between India and the United Kingdom has been long and friendly, and will continue to be to their mutual advantage.*

*His Majesty's Government cannot conclude this statement without expressing on behalf of the people of this country their goodwill and the good wishes toward the people of India as they go*

*forward to this final stage in their achievement of self-government. It will be the wish of everyone in these islands that, notwithstanding constitutional changes, the association of the British and Indian peoples should not be brought to an end, and they will wish to continue to do all that is in their power to further the well-being of India.”*

With this speech, the process of decolonisation of the Indian subcontinent began. Its result was a mad scramble amongst the Indian Princes, who had maintained their separate kingdoms throughout British rule in the country to start posturing to secure the best possible deal for themselves. The integration of Princely States with the rest of the Provinces had always been Nehru's endgame, and the die was cast with Attlee's speech and the Indian Independence Bill being turned into an Act by the British Parliament.

Leonard Mosley, in *The Last Days of the British Raj*, captures the tension at the time: “The bold front that some of the Princes, particularly the Nawab of Bhopal, had hoped to present to the politicians in British India, was already in disarray by the time the Congress and Muslim League had agreed to accept the plan for Indian independence, and the situation deteriorated rapidly thereafter. As Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes (Narendra Mandal in Hindi), Bhopal was given a prior look at the general outline of the Independence Bill even before the Congress and Muslim League leaders saw it, for it was felt that his word not to divulge its contents was rather more likely to be kept than that of the politicians. His immediate reaction was to ask whether it was the intention of His Majesty's Government (HMG) to grant Dominion status to individual Princely States in the same way as Pakistan and India. The Viceroy replied that this was not HMG's intention. Bhopal therefore bitterly complained that the British were once again letting the Princely States down, and that he, as the Muslim Prince of a Hindu State, would be put at the mercy of the Congress.”

## How the Princes Responded

**T**he Nawab of Bhopal, Hamidullah Khan – harbouring delusions of grandeur as were several others like him – was filled with dread. He reckoned that the Congress would swoop down on him (which it would do, eventually). Three days later, he resigned as Chancellor of the Chamber and announced that he would consider himself free and independent to choose the destiny of his State for himself the moment the British left India. He left the last Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, in no doubt that he abhorred the Congress and would have nothing to do with a Congress-dominated India.



*Nawab Hamidullah Khan of Bhopal*

Mountbatten, while admitting that the Independence Bill contained the words, “On the other hand, should any State not enter into a relationship with a Dominion, we should be forced to consider a separate relationship with it”— flatly informed Bhopal that he would consider any representations from the Princely States on this matter as “purely hypothetical”. He was resolved to do nothing about them. Mountbatten thereby shut the door in the face of the Nawab and others who had reckoned that the Bill in fact gave them room for manoeuvre.

A section of the Princes, however, led by Bhopal continued to actively pursue the idea of independence—free of both Dominions of India and Pakistan, rather as separate Dominions themselves. Mountbatten played a critical role in the Congress, striking at the wayward Princes one by one. In fact, history records that he actively worked with Nehru and the Congress in their quest to integrate the provinces with the Princely States and keep India unified in the face of Partition.

Rosita Forbes, who travelled to India and met many of these Princes wrote in *India of the Princes* (1939): “The Chamber (of Princes) which has lost a great deal of its effect owing to the defection or indifference of some of the leading Princes, and to the divergence of opinion expressed by the rest of its members, is a deliberative and consultative organisation. It should be the spearhead of the States' opinion, although the Congress (described as 'extremists' by the author) assert that in few cases do the Princes represent the people they rule, but it has no executive powers. The India Act of 1935 is presumably based on the assumption in case of the Federation of the States would introduce a strong conservative element to counter balance the untested socialism of the Congress party. While conferring complete autonomy on the 11 provinces of British India, subject to the reasonable but much criticised safeguards, it gave to the Princes representation in the Central Legislature far in excess of what could be claimed on a basis of population. For while the peoples of the States number only 80,000,000 compared to 270,000,000 of British India, the Princes can send 104 members out of the 250 to the Upper House (the Council of State) and 125 out of the 375 to the Federal Assembly. At

present the Congress hold office in seven of the 11 provinces of British India, and their Hindu leaders appear to regard Federation as a conspiracy between Britain and the Princes to put an end to any hope of Indian unity and freedom. On the other hand, the Moslem attack the Federation and the disproportional representation given to the States on the ground that the Princes would send as representatives to the federal legislature a preponderating body of Hindus, thus giving Congress a stable Hindu majority capable of keeping Indian Islam in subjection."

Forbes had a point of view, but all this was to be turned on its head by Lord Louis Mountbatten and Jawaharlal Nehru. In fact, Mountbatten's role of cajoling—threatening, if necessary—the Princes has been underplayed. Nehru was the baiter, the man who first told the Princes why their integration was vital for a unified India. Mountbatten, leveraging his connections with the King Emperor and India's vast community of Princes who thought of him as one of their own, played the role of a pivot in bringing them towards India. It was Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as deputy Prime Minister and Minister for States who then organised their takeover wherever necessary. Without Mountbatten as Viceroy, India may well have looked different in form and shape.



*Lord Louis Mountbatten in 1946*



Tension and unease had started building up much earlier, at a crucial two-day meeting of the Chamber in Bhopal on 12 and 13 July 1946, with Sir Manubhai Mehta (Dewan of Baroda State) as Chairman. Sir CP Ramaswami Iyer (Dewan of Travancore) was invited, along with Sir Sultan Ahmed (Advisor to the Chamber) to review the latest developments related to the Cabinet Mission's proposals as they affected the States. Sir CP stated that he had been invited by the Mission to meet them in his personal capacity and he had made it clear that any views expressed by him would not *ipso facto* bind Travancore or any other State. He had, however, held informal discussions with the Chancellor before the meeting with the Mission. Sir CP said he had expressed his strong opposition to the idea of Pakistan before the Mission.

Sir CP felt that the attitude of the Mission was helpful towards the States. The following points emerged from his discussion with the Mission members:

1. Paramountcy would cease to exist after the interim period.
2. Paramountcy would not be inherited by future or interim governments of India.
3. The question of allocation interse of States' quota of seats in the proposed Constituent Assembly and the method of selection of these representatives had been left to the States to be settled in consultation with others concerned.
4. The urgent need for internal reforms in the States and genuine consitutionalisation of their governments. He had told the Mission that a removable Executive of the British model should not be regarded as either essential or necessarily suited to the political conditions in the States.
5. He had argued for a coordinated and coherent policy on behalf of the States.

Sir Sultan endorsed Sir CP's comments but added that unity amongst members of the Chamber was vital. This way they would contribute towards the development and freedom of India and the States.

Most importantly, the meeting drew the attention of the States to the fact that with the termination of Paramountcy after the interim period, the obligation of the Crown to protect a State or its ruling dynasty from internal disorder and external aggression would cease to exist, leaving them with no choice but to join either of the two Dominions. While there was much speculation on what would happen if they did not opt for one of the two Dominions, nothing clear-cut emerged.

At the request of the members, The Chancellor, Sir Hamidullah Khan, who had set himself up as the leader of the Third Force, addressed the meeting, too. The time for wearing blinkers was over, he said, even as some of the members hoped and prayed that the transfer of power would not impact them adversely. Hamidullah Khan reiterated that without giving away the legitimate and fundamental rights of the States, the representatives of the States should still refrain at this juncture from any words or actions which might hamper or delay the immediate attainment of India's freedom or which could be construed as unpatriotic or un-princely. At the same time, they should not meekly submit to recent developments or endorse the public statements made by some Indian leaders, which threatened to undermine the position of duly constituted authorities in the States and which ran counter to the fundamental principles that had emerged from the declarations made by the Mission and the Viceroy, on the basis of which the States had agreed to endorse the proposed Constitutional Plan.

The Chancellor emphasised that the States had a right to exist and to make their special contribution to the India of the future, and they could not allow themselves to be placed in a position which would make it practically impossible for them to do so. His Highness also spoke about the determination of the States to help their motherland and not to reject any offer of cooperation so long as the terms of cooperation were not unilaterally altered. Fear stalked the Chamber. It might be argued that the Rulers were indulging in a play of semantics, but there is no doubt that the pressure on them was intense. They wanted to retain their hereditary rights and privileges in the new democratic India. The statement issued by the Cabinet Mission on 16 May 1946 had given Bhopal and the Chamber much

hope – the precise form which their cooperation would take could be a matter for negotiation during the building up to a new constitutional structure. It by no means followed that the status of all States would be identical.

Scraps of paper were bandied about. Appendix A from the report of the Special Drafting Committee prepared in September 1945 was dug out. The Chamber felt the Appendix should be viewed in the light of the Cabinet Mission's statement. The moot point made in Appendix A was as follows: A formula had to be evolved which, while fully safeguarding the dynastic rights, territorial integrity and other privileges of the States, did not subject the powers of the Indian Union to any external authority. They felt it was important that the dynastic rights of the Princes should be expressly mentioned in the Treaty to be concluded between Britain and India, as it would give these rights great moral and legal strength, if at any time the Indian Union displayed a tendency to encroach upon them.

All attempts at building the moat to protect the Princes were, however, foiled by Nehru and Mountbatten. But the Chamber did not give up. The power of publicity and public relations was leveraged adequately. *Indian India*, a monthly magazine brought out by the Chamber showcased the progressive work carried out across the Princely States. In the correspondence between the Nawab of Bhopal and Maharajadhiraj Yadavindra Singh of Patiala discussing the journal in December 1945, a gem emerges: the latter is found urging the former to ensure the magazine carries balanced and well-reasoned editorials serving *inter alia* to counter the hostile criticism emanating from certain sections of the media against the Princes. The letter said: “Propaganda to be effective, has to be subtle, it is imperative therefore, to dilute with a small dose of propaganda a heavy volume of literature of every day interest to send it down the throats of intelligent readers. It becomes necessary for that reason not to reproduce anything and everything that the States would send but to secure from eminent men of letters and distinguished administrators and statesmen, both in the States and British India, articles which would make real contributions to the problems confronting the Indian States.”

# The Confederation Plan

**A**t another meeting of the Standing Committee of the Chamber In Bombay, in the light of certain assurances given by the head of the Political Department, Sir Conrad Cornfield – who was playing master tactician on behalf of the Secretary of States in the UK and running black ops to keep the Princes 'interested' – discussions were held on groupings and confederations of States. A discussion note stated, "Certain isolated States, not big enough to stand by themselves, which are surrounded by British Indian territory, would obviously find it necessary to merge with a neighbouring Province."

An extract from the Chamber's Drafting Report provides a glimpse into what the ring-fencing plan was:

- “1. States of Rajputana, Western India, almost all the Gujarat States, the more important Central India States and the States of Bahawalpur and Khairpur in the Punjab are contiguous. The big area of Rajasthan is separated by small tracts of British Indian territory from two other regions of the Indian States comprising:
  - a) The other Central India States, the Eastern States, almost all the States in the Central Provinces
  - b) The other Punjab States except Kapurthala, Tehri and the Simla Hill States
2. Hyderabad lies in the south connected only with the State of Bastar and separated by small tracts of British Indian territory from Mysore on one side and the Eastern States on the other.
3. Travancore and Cochin lie close to each other and separate by a tract of British Indian territory from Mysore.
4. Certain States such as Bengal States, Rampur, Benares,

Kapurthala, Travancore, Cochin, Pudukottai, some of the Deccan States, Kashmir and the Hill States of the Punjab are separated from other States by tracts of British Indian territory which are either large or difficult to traverse.”

Different scenarios and battle plans were put together. This was a plan perfect for self preservation. While the proposal of grouping differed from the schemes of grouping discussed in the past, this time around it was ostensibly to enable the States to take their due place in the all-India structure at the appropriate level. The Report said that the new Groups would actively function only after the future Constitution of India began to operate. At that time Paramountcy would have terminated and there would be no risk of outside interference of political officers in the internal administration of the States. The adherence of any State to a Group under the new Plan would be on a voluntary basis. It was confidently hoped, however, that the terms proposed for grouping would be such as to enhance the survival value of the States—big and small—and of their reigning dynasties, which might induce all States in the region to join the group. Moreover, the political structure envisioned for the future India makes it obvious that the bigger the group, the greater its utility to its component states.

The planning was well structured and well thought out. Narender Mandal's economic adviser added ballast to the plan by arguing that this would be in consonance with "the interests of the States as also of India as a whole at least for the next 15 years which would call for any adjustments, psychological, financial as well as Constitutional." The economic adviser advocated that while revolutionary changes would be taking place in India after the transfer of power, the creation of this buffer –the Confederation of Princely States–would reduce much unnecessary hardship and would further help towards better understanding between the government at the Centre and Individual States, in the initial period when much irritation could arise since the parties were unfamiliar with each other. It was a brilliant plan to delay the inevitable, create a Confederation of States which continued even while the rest of India formed its own government.

Even earlier at a Standing Committee meeting of the Chamber in Delhi on 27 to 30 September 1945, several items were listed on the agenda which seemed to assume the States would remain even after India gained Independence. They included “consideration of the latest position in regard to the Industrial Policy of the Government of India as it affects the States”, “air navigation in the States”, “demarcation of the Civil Lists of Rulers from the Administrative Budgets of the States”, among others.

Clearly, the Princes were unclear and anxious about the road ahead. A secret memorandum, for instance, circulated in the Narender Mandal in April-May 1945 and datelined Bombay, displayed their apprehension. The memorandum stated: “The Indian States will be glad as always in the interest of their Motherland, to make their contribution, in every reasonable manner compatible with the sovereignty and integrity of the States, towards the framing of the new Constitution of India.” Their overwhelming sense seemed to be that they would be partners with the new governments in the Dominions and would have considerable say and freedom in the governance of their respective States, even as they contemplated and flirted with the idea of independence. But this was unacceptable to both Nehru and Mountbatten first, and later to Sardar Patel and V. P. Menon, who carried out the assimilation process as well.



*VP Menon signing the Patiala and East Punjab States Union covenant.*

The clincher though comes from the same secret memorandum, which says: “The States should be assured, however, that in the event of a number of States not finding it feasible to adhere, the non-adhering States or Group of States so desiring would have the right to form a Union of their own with full sovereign status in accordance with a suitable and agreed procedure devised for the purpose.” Such a provision, it has since been explained, need not necessarily have led to a separate Union or Unions of the States. But it would have placed the States at par with the Provinces in the Constitution-making body and could have assisted the framing of a Constitution, considered reasonable and fair by the Princes, to which the State would have been able to adhere.

This April-May 1945 Bombay-dated secret memorandum provides clues to the state of mind of the Chamber. Another excerpt says: “The question of a separate Union or Unions for the States was further examined by a Special Committee of the States. It reached the conclusion that the attitude of the States on this issue would depend to a large extent on whether British India would have one or two Unions and whether either or both these Unions would or would not include the States. In the event of a single Union of an all India character being set up, there is likely to be a greater urge on the part of the States either to join it or to remain aloof than to form a separate Union of their own. The picture would be different, however, if a single All India Centre does not emerge as a result of the future Constitutional discussions and if British India itself is divided into two Unions, whether admitting States or not. The difference in the advantages of joining any such Union with a few of the Provinces and those of joining Union or Unions of States alone would then not be so great.”

Perplexed by the continuing ambiguity, the Princes were prone to turnabouts. The Nawab of Bhopal, for example, in a speech around the same time in mid-1945 said: “I feel necessary to repudiate, in language which will not permit of doubt or ambiguity, the insidious suggestions made by certain quarters in India, which misrepresent the Indian Princes as opponents of India's Constitutional freedom

and as impediments to her progress to that end. Never was there a greater distortion of the truth. We yield to none in patriotism and love for our own country. We wish to see her great and honoured, filling in her own right a position in the comity of the world to which her history and the achievements of her people entitle her. To assist in securing this end, we are ready to make what contribution we can. But the sanctity of covenants is the foundation of all civilised life, and no party which respects sanctity of covenants can blame us for urging that any constitutional arrangements for India must ensure due fulfilment of the established rights of the States and that these rights should not be unilaterally modified.”

Once HMG declared its intention of giving India Dominion status under the Statute of Westminster, a certain amount of inevitability crept in. The States had to bear in mind new India's federal structure. A Study Circle appointed by the Chamber provided the following salient points on 21 August 1945:

- “1. They would not occupy in the forthcoming discussions the position of vantage which they occupied during the federal negotiations when their accession was made a condition precedent to responsibility at the Centre. The Sir Stafford Cripps formula provided and recent developments indicated that British India may become a Dominion even without the adherence of the States. The main reason therefore which previously necessitated accommodating the claims of the States thus no longer existed.
2. It was further emphasised that the War Effort of the States was not likely to make up for the purpose of negotiation the loss of the position which the States once enjoyed.
3. Continuance on the basis of Paramountcy is not a future which can be faced with equanimity, especially when the rest of India comes to enjoy freedom.
4. Finally the British government will not be in a position in a Dominion India effectively to fulfil its obligations of defence



or to safeguard the non-acceding States against economic strangulation or discrimination by the Dominion Govt.”

The decks had been cleared and a no-nonsense procedure constructed for the States to adhere to. The Study Circle asked for immediate legislative, judicial and administrative reforms for better governance in the States. The last paragraph of its report said: “The next few months are likely to be the most crucial in the history of the States. The time for action is here and now, and postponement of such action would involve the greatest peril to the very existence of the States.” These words resonate even today, since the Nawabs and Maharajas chose to ignore the Study Circle's views on addressing the governance deficit and thereby uplifting the people of their States. Time does not wait for anyone; it certainly did not wait for the Princes.

It is not that the Princes as a rule refused to change and usher in reforms. Among them, the Maharaja of Cochin, was the first to announce the setting up of a full responsible government in his State. He earned a reputation for being far-sighted and statesmanlike. In July 1946, he sent word to the Cochin Legislative Council informing them that he would remain a purely Constitutional Head of State. He partly implemented that announcement by appointing a few ministers responsible to the legislature besides the Dewan to carry on the administration of the State. Later in August 1947, he terminated the Office of the Dewan, although he did not transfer all the departments under the Dewan to the elected government. He arranged to have the reserved departments administered by a minister of his choice.

## Corfield's Role

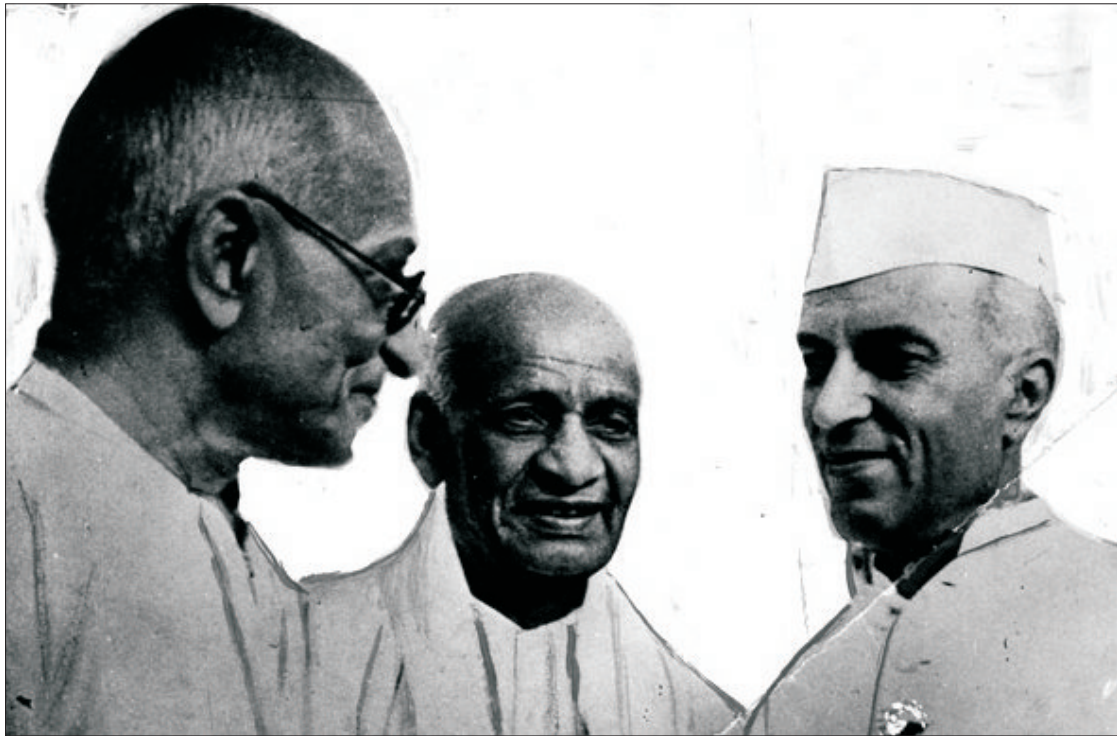
In that atmosphere of flux where the Princes were wary of the Congress and the Crown was not as cooperative as it used to be, the Political Adviser, the crafty Sir Conrad Corfield, began to play an increasingly crucial role. He was at the centre of the machinations, constantly prodding and persuading the Princes to take shifting positions. He was keen to save at least three of the bigger Princely states from being swallowed up by the Indian union, especially Hyderabad and Bhopal.

As such he was at constant loggerheads with Mountbatten over the issue of the Princes and bypassing him, opened a direct channel of communication with Secretary of State for India in London, Lord Listowel. Listowel included a clause in the Indian Independence Bill, which lapsed Paramountcy only on the day India became independent, so that India – unless it could make arrangements by agreement beforehand – would be confronted on August 15 with nearly 600 princely states containing 100 million people, each state completely independent.

Not surprisingly, a meeting convened by the Viceroy on 13 June 1947, attended by Pandit Nehru, Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Corfield, among others, saw Nehru seething with rage. He blasted Corfield, saying: “I charge the Political Department and Corfield particularly with misfeasance. I consider that a judicial enquiry at the highest level into their actions is necessary.” But Corfield's lobbying has had some impact. First Travancore announced that he would become an independent sovereign state after August 15, using Corfield's interpretation of the Indian Independence Bill. Travancore even said that he was appointing a trade agent with Pakistan. The next day, the Nizam of Hyderabad followed suit.

Corfield, however, had not contended with Sardar Patel and his trusted lieutenant V. P. Menon who were not willing to give an inch. The method they employed was simple: approach each prince individually and negotiate by asking him to accede to the Indian Union under three subjects only – defence, external affairs, and communications. Patel and Menon also secured Lord

Mountbatten's assent to negotiate with the Rulers. Menon had devised an Instrument of Accession and on 25 July 1947, the princes were told that there was a 'take it or leave it' political offer from the Congress which would not be repeated. One by one the princes queued up to sign. But Hyderabad stood aloof, as did Travancore, Bhopal, Indore, Jodhpur, Mysore and Junagadh.



*Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru*

Maharaja Hanwant Singh of Jodhpur was more or less convinced by Corfield not to sign the Instrument of Accession, and instead choose Pakistan. Menon, however, was on the ball. He took the young Maharaja to meet Mountbatten where a decisive breakthrough was achieved.

To foil the Nawab of Bhopal's ambition of a combined state of princes on par with Pakistan and India, Sardar Patel moved with alacrity, alongside Nehru, calling their bluff. Together they brought the vagrant princes around after they disclosed the role of Nawab of Bhopal as a saboteur. Congress used the Maharajas of Bikaner, Patiala and Cochin to frustrate Sir Hamidullah Khan of Bhopal, who was using the Chamber of Princes as a bargaining lever to protect and perpetuate the princely order. ©RF

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