PRINCELY GIFTS

I. RAJAHS IN THE RAJ

A. HOW MANY PRINCES?

The Raj had to work through the native princes.

– the Wali of Swat

– the Jam of Nawanagar

– the Maharajah of Patiala, whose official name was so long that the word Lord appeared 108 times, and to shorten it, the numbers 108 were put into it after the first use of the word Lord.¹

&c.²

¹ John Gunther, Inside Asia, 447.

² Something to get straight right away. A Rajah is not the same as a Maharajah. The term raja means “one who rules.” It also means “one whose duty is to please.” This is the original Sanscritic meaning – implying, necessarily, the responsibility of a prince to his people. But the term, in its official sense, needs distinguishing. Rajah means “king.” Maharajah means “great king.” Generally the title “His Highness” goes with Maharajahs, and some of only the very highest rank of Rajah. So You couldn’t have a Maharajah of Sangli – only a Rajah. But the head of Indore or Kalat or Travancore – all 19-gun salute men – would have to be Maharajahs. See Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the
Even in 1900, India had 575 of them.

Their domain – 822,000 square miles – or about 2/5ths of the subcontinent.

Their subjects – 72.5 million people, or one in five in the subcontinent.³

The two biggest in the south were Mysore and Hyderabad.

Hyderabad had 83,000 square miles to it.

But all along the northern edge of India, they cluttered up the maps.

Kashmir was some 80,000 square miles.

A stone’s throw off, though, were states like Dedan – so tiny that even the administration in Bombay didn’t know anything

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Over 400 princes had realms less than 20 square miles in size. One was two square miles – one five square miles.

One prince ruled a cow pasture – nothing else. And one princedom had 27 inhabitants, and an annual revenue of 80 rupees, about $29.60!  

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4 Lawrence James, *Rai*, 326. Right here, a very strong word of caution has to be uttered. Most of the shockers come from Collins and LaPierre’s *Freedom at Midnight*, and John Lord’s *The Maharajahs* (New York: Random House, 1971). They’re good stories, and some are shockers. **But are they true? And should they matter?**

I’m not sure they do or should. Collins and La Pierre got their material from interviews, which we cannot check, including interviews with the man in charge of the confidential files – the ones that were burned thirty years before the appearance of the book; whether the files were accurate or collections of tittle-tattle is not clear, because the files were destroyed. Still more seems to have come from Lord’s book, and that, full of good stories, defies belief. Imagine Sir Bhupinder Singh of Patiala eating 50 pounds of food a day! Is it credible? Not to me – but it certainly is to Lord (see p. 159).

5 Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 166. This may have been the prince of Vejanoness, on the western peninsula of Kathiawar – most of the teeny states were there, several hundred anyhow – whose estate was 22 acres, and who had 22 subjects. Annual revenue from them: 450 rupees. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 17.

Put ‘em together, and it amounts to about a third of the land mass of India.

B. JEWELS IN THE CROWN?

The very highest princes were as exotic a collection as the world has known.

They took themselves very seriously.

One prince declared himself a Maharajah and a quarter ...

to put himself ahead of the rest.

And if you went to Jaipur, you found that wherever the royal flag flew, there was a little flag, just one-fourth the size flying right under it.

You want fabulously rich? Go to Baroda. The Maharajah there loves gold and jewels.

He made his court tunic of spun gold.

And only one family could weave the threads, under law.

They had to grow their fingernails tremendously long – then cut and notch them like comb’s teeth.

The gold threads need that tender care, to be massaged
He had one terrific collection of historic diamonds.

One they called Star of the South, seventh-biggest in the world.

(Brazilian – 128 ½ carats)

Napoleon III had offered it to his Empress.

He had tapestries made of pearls, with the designs in it made of

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7 Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 168.
rubies and emeralds.\textsuperscript{8}

But in Bharatpur, there was a Maharajah that made him look like a piker.

Ivory figures and statues.

And ivory takes years to do a single careful work in.

All from elephant’s tusks.\textsuperscript{9}

The Maharajah of Kapurthala had the biggest topaz in the world –
goldeny orange, and stunning – especially set in
a field of three thousand diamonds and pearls.

The treasure of the Maharajah of Jaipur was so precious that the
Maharajah was only allowed to see it once in his lifetime.

It had always been that way.

He would go to the hill where it was guarded by a tribe of warriors,
and choose the stones from it for his particular reign.

... like the rubies the size of pigeon’s eggs...

\textsuperscript{8} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 168, taking from John Lord, \textit{The Maharajahs},
134-35.

\textsuperscript{9} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 169.
... or the 90 carat emeralds (that’s huuuge)\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10}Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 169.
The Maharajah of Patiala\textsuperscript{11} had a million dollar pearl necklace.\textsuperscript{12}

Nothing, compared to his diamond breastplate – 1,001 blue-white diamonds.

Every year he would appear in public before his crowds, wearing it – and nothing else.

And, from all accounts, it seemed to have an arousing quality ... at least on him.

All of this was religious, meant to represent one of the Indian gods’ phallic majesty.

Crowds were expected to make compliments ... and not on the diamond breastplate.\textsuperscript{13}

Another Maharajah, the one in Mysore, took crushed diamonds as a medication, apparently because a Chinese scholar told him they were aphrodisiacs.\textsuperscript{14}

\section*{ELEPHANTS}

For a prince, the sign of his greatness was in elephants.

They are important in Hindu mythology.

\textsuperscript{11} Bhupinder Singh (born around 1890, died 1938).


\textsuperscript{13} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 169.

\textsuperscript{14} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 169.
Elephants hold up the pillars of the universe.

They support the sky and the clouds.

So the more elephants a prince has, and the older they are, and the bigger, the more important and prestigious he is.

For the Maharajah of Mysore, that put him in first class.

Every year for a Hindu festival, he would parade a thousand elephants through the city. Blankets of flowers covered their foreheads, and of jewels and of gold.

And on the back of the biggest bull elephant the throne of the Maharajah, made of gold, with cloth of gold brocade velvet, and over it the symbol of princely power,

... an umbrella.

Two other elephants were reserved for his ancestors.

They had empty howdahs.

Because, of course, the ancestors were already dead.¹⁵

If you had a party in Baroda, the custom was an elephant fight.

The picadors, if you call it that, jab them with spears to get them fighting mad, and set them on each other.

The ground, the walls, shake from the roars.

And it’s always to the death.\textsuperscript{16}

Like your spectacles less gory? Then I suggest you visit Dhenkanal in eastern India. The Rajah there put on a regular display each year for thousands of onlookers, of two elephants, the choicest two, having sex.

**ROLLS-ROYCES**

All of this was long before cars, of course. Cars became the status symbol – though for ceremonial purposes the elephant still played a heavy role.

India’s first auto was made in France, designed for the Mahrajah of Patiala. It had the lowest number of any license plate in

\textsuperscript{16} John Lord, *The Maharajahs*, 133-34.
The Nizam of Hyderabad, a notorious cheapskate, got his another way.

Any car he liked, he sent word to his subject that he would be glad to accept it.

He collected hundreds of gifts that way – none of which he ever drove.\(^{18}\)

Naturally, your True Prince needs a Rolls-Royce. It’s the car of kings, or even the truck, in some cases.

Patiala’s maharaja had 27.

(Plus hundreds of other cars)


\(^{18}\) Say Collins and LaPierre, apparently getting their information from John Lord, *The Maharajahs* 81 – whose source for information is wholly unknown.
Bharatpur’s had a silver-plated convertible.

(It was said to be good for stimulating sexual desire; so the Maharajah, being a very considerate man, lent it to another prince for his wedding).

Alwar’s maharajah outdid them all: gold plated Lanchester, inside and out. Sculpted ivory steering wheel.

Gold-brocaded cushions inside.

And – for the Maharajah to sit in – a perfect replica of the throne of the King of England.

... all this and a driving speed of 70 miles per hour, too!!

A good Maharajah can afford hobbies –

Immense electrical toy trains, for instance.

Or how about dogs?

Junagadh is mighty small, just north of Bombay.

But the prince loved dogs.

Each one got his own apartment

... with electricity

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19 Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, Freedom at Midnight, 171. Not that Jay Singh of Alwar stuck with a Lanchester. His favorite cars were Hispano-Suizas, and he always bought them three at a time, all in blue. French tapestry single-point upholstery inside. When he got tired of them, he is said to have given them a ceremonial funeral and buried them in the hillsides near his palace. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 153.
domestic servants
and telephones.

And when they died, their remains were carried off to Chopin’s "Funeral March"
to mausoleums made of marble!\(^{20}\)

When his favorite dog married – to a Labrador named Bobby –
every other prince and dignitary was invited.

The Viceroy was invited, too, but he wouldn’t come.

But 150,000 other people did line the streets to cheer the marriage chariot.

**PALACES**

A Maharajah’s palace is the best monument to his wealth.

Mysore’s was 600 rooms.

All full of dead, hunted animals –
panthers
elephants
tigers
buffalo

\(^{20}\) Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 172. The Maharajah of Patiala was another dog-fancier, with 95 royal dogs and three English trainers. His dog hospital had three wards and an operating theater. The royal kennels had electric light. (This is, presumably, Bhupinder Singh, about which more anon).

But the people of Patiala were not at all so fortunate. People called him “His Exhausted Highness,” because of the size of his harem and his efforts to add to it. Patiala was very Sikh in its make-up. See John Gunther, *Inside Asia*, 456-57.
Just one side of the palace in Jaipur had 953 windows
all in marble inlaid frames.

This was the celebrated Palace of the Wind.

The Maharajah of Kapurthala\textsuperscript{21} took a tour of Europe.

When he saw Louis XIV’s palace in Versailles, he decided that
he had been Louis XIV in another life –

perfectly possible; that’s what reincarnation is all about!

So, when he got home, he made his own Versailles.

Crowds of French architects and decorators came to India to
reproduce the palace at the foot of the Himalayas.

And from France he bought Gobelin tapestries

French antiques

Sevres vases.

The prince declared that the language of his court must be
French.

His Sikh retainers turned in their turbans for powdered wigs and
silk waistcoats and slippers with silver buckles.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Jagatjit Singh, that would be – who had been prince from 1876 until his death after long sickness, in Bombay in 1949 – the very last prince, because by then India had wiped away the princely state. One mourner was the State Pandit, himself very old who said, “Here was a very great man, and the strange thing is he built the state and he took it with him.” Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, \textit{Lives of the Indian Princes} (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 299-300.
THRONES

Think of thrones of solid gold – a ton in weight – at the top of nine solid gold steps.

(The God Vishnu had nine steps in rising to truth).

... or a throne that was actually a very big bed that an antique dealer in London had sold to the prince –

but now covered in jewels!

the perfect replica of Queen Victoria’s wedding bed!

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22 Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 173. It sounds screwier the way Collins and LaPierre tell it. For in fact, Jagatjit Singh did not turn the palace into another Versailles – only certain rooms of it. Others were done in the Japanese style – he collected Japanese lacquer chairs and other antiques, too – or Turkish (the smoking room, with motifs out of Marrakesh). And the main durbar hall wasn’t the Palace of Mirrors. It was done up in the Indian style, the wood carving all Indian. The floors of it were so well polished that servants would tie their turbans by the reflection. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 32.
Think of a throne room as big as the inside of a cathedral.

Except that the pillars were white marble, not granite.

And they were carved to look like nude women....

not quite the stuff of which Notre Dame is made.

That was Rampur’s. And the Nawab was very practical.

No sense interrupting business to do ... business.

So there was a hole cut in the seat of the throne so that he could take care of necessary things while still holding an audience.\(^\text{23}\)

**C. THE SPORT OF KINGS**

What does a Prince do with his time? He can’t make war any longer.

So he makes love.
Or he goes in for sport.

The jungles are his exclusive royal forest.

Only a prince – or anyone he permits – can go hunting

\(^{23}\) Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 173.
And there’s lots of them left: easily 20,000 of them as late as 1947.

The Maharajah of Gwalior would plug 1,400 tigers in his day, and even wrote a guide to tiger-shooting.

The prince of Bharatpur turned their skins into wall to wall carpeting for his palace reception-room.

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24 This has to be remembered. The tiger was a royal beast. You could get in trouble hunting tigers, without the very exclusive permission of the prince. We look at the bag, then, and it gives us a very different picture than the wild proclivities of the sensational numbers of Collins and LaPierre. Go, for instance, to Udaipur. Thirteen thousand square miles. And there were exactly seven people allowed to shoot tigers.

That was one reason why, into the 20th century, there were so many tigers in India – and why the real downfall of tigers has come with the downfall of the princes.

This is the statistic. In 1930 there were 40,000 tigers. In 1946 there were 30,000. But most of the decline wasn’t in princely India; none was – there, numbers stayed steady. It was in British India.

Let this be noted, too. A lot of princes never went in for tiger-shoots at all. And many of them disapproved of hunting in any form. For all this, see Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 140-44.
(Other people sewed them together, of course).\textsuperscript{25}

(The other side of it was that the princes, by making so much of the forest poacher-free, in a lot of cases were conservationists of the first order.
If you over-shoot a forest, there’s no hunting for your grandsons.

It’s not by accident that the finest national parks in India today were the hunting grounds that the princes kept as their

\textsuperscript{25} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 174.
One Sikh prince used his time in polo – which he couldn’t get enough of and in chasing women – which he also couldn’t get enough of. His stable had 500 polo ponies, among the best in the world.

His harem had 350 women. And, so that they would be perfect, he kept a retinue of plastic surgeons from France and Britain, so that – in case he no longer liked somebody’s nose – he could have it changed.

As fashions changed, so did his harem’s faces; because the prince really read London fashion mags carefully, to see what profiles were the style of the day.

A whole laboratory worked on cosmetics, lotions and scents for his ladies.

Of course, even a man like Sir Bhupinder Singh, the prince, couldn’t really satisfy 350 women on a regular basis.

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So he had a lot of aphrodisiacs...
a mix of gold, pearls, spices, silver and iron

and his favorite, mixing shredded carrots with the crushed brains of sparrows.\textsuperscript{27}

and, eventually, radium.

Princes like that get what they deserve. He got so bored that he stopped having sex at all, and then stopped living at all.

\section*{D. ENLIGHTENED DESPOTS – AND OTHERS}

Some princes were good, some very good, some bad, some horrible.

By and large, the smaller princes were well-behaved.

No fancy life-style for them.

No flagrant moral laxity for them.

They couldn’t afford it.

Being little means that the British would find it a lot easier to depose you – or force you to explain yourself.

\textsuperscript{27} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 174-75. Again, these horrid stories are wondrous. But it’s very reasonable to ask where the verification comes from. In this case, it is clearly the wholly undocumented, unfootnoted John Lord, \textit{The Maharajahs} (New York: Random House, 1971), 162-63, done in the gushy, wink-wink style of profoundest sensation. Bhupinder Singh certainly had an immense harem; and his children had their own palace with many dozen children. At the same time, they were well treated and Bhupinder Singh cared a great deal for his children, and hired plenty of Scottish and English nurses for them. All the same, you have to wonder: who knew all the stuff that Collins and LaPierre claim to have knowledge of? Is it all old wives’ tales? See the more measured portraits in Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, \textit{Lives of the Indian Princes} (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 19, 26-27, 231-32, 240, 249, 270-72.
And, let’s face it – elephants cost money.

Where are you going to get the money?

As one princess complained: so much has been written about the princes being womanizers and money-wasters, but “I ask you, where was the time?”

She had gone to Cambridge and done exams,

When she came home, she acted as her father’s secretary, starting work at five in the morning, writing his notes and taking them to the typist.

Her father, the Maharao would dictate and handle office business till afternoon. Then he would have lunch, go for a walk, and listen to grievances – this was expected – by people, sometimes hundreds.

It was like a doctor’s schedule, overbooked, always running behind.

Many rulers were very simple, partly because they couldn’t afford to be lavish, and partly for religious reasons.

They wouldn’t eat meats – didn’t drink, didn’t smoke.

Discipline regulated their whole lives.

And some were positively ascetic, the prince of Jodhpur among them. He detested softness.

He slept on a broad wooden plank;

and he had his cadet corps sleep on marble beds.28

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Of course, these don’t make sensational books – and they would make very dull lectures, so we don’t pay attention to them at all.\textsuperscript{29}

Be honest: when’s the last time you read a memoir called,

\textit{My Thrilling Quarter-Century in Chartered Accounting}?
In Baroda\textsuperscript{30}, the prince\textsuperscript{31} had seen poverty first-hand as a child. He had been a cow-herd on a village farm.

The dowager Maharani adopted him, and with the help of English tutors molded him into a scholar and a westernized king.

Polygamy ended.

\textsuperscript{30} Hot and humid and not so far from Bombay, Baroda was one of the greater states. Two and a half million people lived there in the late nineteenth century, in a space about the size of Massachusetts. Millet and maize and opium poppies – orchards: this was Baroda. People called it the garden of Gujerat. It faced the western sea. Much of the Louis Bromfield novel, \textit{The Rains Came}, took place there. Its enlightened ruler was Gaekwar, who took power when he was 13, in 1875, and died in early 1939.

\textsuperscript{31} Sayajirao III (1863-1939). Sayajirao was pretty abstemious in his private life, too. He was very learned, eagerly so. He had read Plato in the original Greek; he was well acquainted with the writings of Bentham and Spencer, not to mention Lewis Carroll, whose Alice in Wonderland he ordered translated into Marathi. He was so punctual that people could regulate their watches by him, and did. They would say, “The Maharajah is going to the office, so it must be ten o’clock.” British officials were very upset at his drinking habits – he \textit{wouldn’t}! It was, they thought, dreadfully bad manners when he drank the health of the King-Emperor ... \textit{in water}!!

His real problem in later years was keeping busy. He started trying things like window-dressing for stores and growing soya beans. He tried going on vacation in Europe, and found it a miserable substitute for doing things. When he visited plays, he kept interrupting his aides to ask about policy, irritating the audiences. See John Lord, \textit{The Maharajahs}, 140-45; Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, \textit{Lives of the Indian Princes} (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 101-02.
A free public education system was set up, for every boy in the realm – and all this in the 1800s.

The Maharajah there was one of the main protectors of the Untouchables, working to give them full equality and justice.

He built public housing for them.

He set up schools for them.

And he sent their leader to do college work at Columbia University.32

In Rajasthan, which was bone-dry, the Maharajah used his money to build gardens and lakes, not for himself, but for his people.

In Bhopal, women were closer to men’s equal than anywhere else in the Subcontinent. And that was by decree of the prince.

For hydro-electric dams and for industries and for top-notch scientists, come to Mysore.... and it was no accident.

For one of the best observatories in the world, come to Jaipur.

The Maharajah was the descendant of a famous

32 Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 98-103; John Lord, The Maharajahs, 144. The Untouchable leader was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who studied anthropology and law, and came back to battle against a caste system that would not even let him, degree or none, rent a room in India.
astronomer, the man who had translated Euclid into Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{33}

One of the greatest was Ganga Singh of Bikaner (it’s west of Delhi, a big state just on the edge of the Punjab).

He had a voice like a tiger’s, and tremendous personality.

There were no new-fangled ideas about democracy with him.

His people were his children. Kings often say that – but he really meant it. A Rajah is meant to protect.

Civil servants swore at him. They would work till four in the morning and come back to work at nine,

sometimes not seeing their kids for a fortnight.

When famine struck Bikaner in 1898, there was the Rajah.

He travelled village to village on camel back to see the dying by hundreds.

The lesson couldn’t be missed:

there had been no water for the crops when the rains failed –

and no roads to bring food in for the starving.

\textsuperscript{33} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 178.
As soon as power was his, he bent all his energies to build canals and railroads.

One canal irrigated a thousand square miles.

A whole brown country turned green, and where desert had been, as far as the eye could see, there were lush fields.

Ganga Singh never stopped planning. If you could build one irrigation system, why not two – another, for areas left out?

He kept planning it the rest of his life.

Lying on his deathbed with cancer in 1943, he woke from a coma, and his first words were to ask for the file on the Bhakra Dam.

It was his last wish, and he died the same day.34

But others were abominable figures.

They were like the Nawab of Rampur who bet neighboring princes as to which of them could deflower the most virgins in a year.

The way of totting it up would be the gold nostril-ring those girls wore.

Fortunately for the Nawab, that’s what he had a bureaucracy for.

They rounded up all the eligibles, village by village, and he got to work.

By the end of a year, he had a few pounds of solid gold – made of the thin, light rings, melted down.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 187. Again, I remain skeptical of the source on this story – and the pertinence. Again, the attempt to bring up the sensational gets away from the question: what kind of ruler was the Nawab? What did his personal vices mean for his people, or were they well treated? And it is part of the bias in Collins and LaPierre, I think, to credit the stories the British officials told them, not just to titillate (which they did) but to justify how they could double-cross the princes and wipe them out, in the departure from the Raj in 1947; because what happened was wholesale betrayal, and it is VERY much to the interest of the Viceroy and Residents to insist that the princes were self-indulgent, debased, an excrescence upon their people – just as it is for the Indian Republic leaders to say the same, to justify their expropriation of the princes’ revenue.

What the descendants of princes remember about the Nawab of Rampur – at least Hamid Ali Khan (Nawab till 1930) – was that his main indulgence was food. He loved tremendously good cooking, and had 100 cooks, each of whom had a specialty, and only one specialty. The Nawab ate only one meal a day, at seven in the evening, and between meals stuck to iced water and Turkish cigarettes. But that one meal was about five pounds of food, and it was something he insisted on. In many cases, he would have just one spoonful from each dish – at a single meal there
would be 30 preparations of chicken, 25 dishes of meat, another forty of other kinds of meal, fifty dishes of lentils, ten
different kinds of pullao. Tasting them all took a guest two and a half hours, and at least one guest, when it was over,
had to send for his personal doctor, because the banquet had nearly killed him.

At the same time, this is what is NOT mentioned about the Nawab who loved food. He also loved literature,
and had one of the finest manuscript collections in the world in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. And he and all of his
descendants were intense patrons of literature and painting and music. His son was more interested in cultivating
music than in food, but at the same time, he led in an industrial transformation of Rampur that in two decades tripled
the state’s income. And Sir Syed Raza Ali Khan (1930-48) was not just allowing it to go on. He was a hard working
administrator, who rarely left his desk before nine or ten at night and had a fixed aversion to leaving a single paper or
file undone before he retired for the night. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New
[it’s worth asking, though: what has this got to do with his official responsibilities?

By 1948, when the last Rajah lost his domain, Rampur was one of the most developed Indian states...

...canals, electrification, roads, and sanitation and schools.

All of them had come in within a generation’s time.

All were the work of the Rajah. 36

It should be noticed, too, that one state that had little or no religious trouble was Rampur.

36 Or of his chief minister, Colonel Syed Bashir Hussain Zaidi, who had run things under his father. Zaidi tried to persuade the prince to industrialize, but his father complained that it would only cut down on the number of people available to be cooks and servants in his palace or to join the state forces: they’d go into industry instead. So Zaidi tried a different ruse. When the Viceroy came on a state visit in 1933, after dinner, the colonel said, “Your Excellency, you’ll be very pleased to know that his Highness is thinking of industrializing Rampur.” The Viceroy – Lord Linlithgow got to his feet, went and shook the Rajah’s hand and said, “Your Highness, you’re so enlightened.”

Of course Colonel Zaidi had done something unpardonable in forcing his master into a decision and expected that he would be fired when the Viceroy departed. But it didn’t happen. The Rajah said, “Zaidi, when shall we start?” And the process began at once – sugar factories and railroads to begin with. And the Colonel stayed as Dewan all the way until the state was merged into India in 1948. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 236.
And that was because the Nawab, with equal Muslims and Hindus, split the offices on the council and in the army, opened up the police and civil service to Hindus, and kept the peace.  

II. PET PRINCES

A. MILITARY VALUE

Why bother with princes at all? Why couldn’t an empire have swept them all away, and ruled all India from the Governor-General’s office?

1) with what?

Remember how scanty the number of British bureaucrats is. Less than a thousand.

Remember how few soldiers it has.

You couldn’t make war on the princes without a very ugly, costly struggle.

You couldn’t run their territories with a much bigger bunch of office holders and a larger standing army.

2) the princes are a saving grace.

They are a token that England is NOT there for England’s sake, but for the good of its people.

It has a respect for tradition and order.

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It wants to make the subject people its partners.

That is what the princes are to be: partners with the Raj.

For the Empire, the princes were more than a nuisance and a luxury.

They paid for their keep.

When General Allenby took Haifa from the Turks in the Great War, it was the Lancers of the Maharajah of Jodhpur\(^{38}\) who led the attack.

(He was the same prince who introduced those tapered riding breeches into English society.

... which is why they are called Jodhpurs.)

The princes sent camel corps, to fight in China

in Egypt

in France

and, in the Second World War, in Burma –

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\(^{38}\) Sir Pratap Singh, a most formidable prince, born in 1845, died 1922. In other words, when he went into the battle line in Palestine and the trenches of France, he had been seventy and more. But Sir Pratap was renowned for his courage. As a boy he had hunted leopards only with a sword, and had wrestled wild boars to the ground. All through his manhood, the lancers regiment had been his special hobby. He was a soldier, more than a prince, and proudest of that. He was chivalrous and courteous, and proud. During a hunting expedition with English guests, one of the guests caught a fever and died. There were not enough Englishmen on hand to bear the body away for burial. “I will be the fourth bearer of my friend’s corpse,” Sir Pratap declared, knowing well that under Hindu rites, he would lose caste doing so. On the following day, the Brahmin priests came, to tell him that he must undergo “very severe purification.” Sir Pratap dismissed them. Let them never rebuke him again, said he – there was a caste higher than any other – the caste of the warrior. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 95; John Lord, *The Maharajahs* 197-203.
all as part of the British imperial forces.

And in each case, the Empire didn’t have to pay for a penny of it.

The princes paid their way, equipped them, mustered them.

The Maharao of Bundi won the Military Cross for his work in Burma.

The Maharajah of Jaipur fought at Monte Cassino in World War II.\(^{39}\)

In return for overlordship, a prince was allowed to raise a bigger army than before.

And in a lot of cases, Britain provided the guns ... free.

They were always useful, to be called on, if India was in real danger.

But of course, the need to keep all the princes in line went beyond this.

Imagine trying to run the British posts or telegraph lines, in a patchwork, where some rulers will allow it and some won’t.

That’s one thing they have to give – free access.\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 177. And let’s not forget that sooooo stingy Nizam of Hyderabad. He provided two regiments of Lancers, at his own expense, to guard the Suez Canal in the Great War. He provided $100 million in gifts to the war effort – which is what got him the titles “Exalted Highness” and “Faithful Ally.” In the Second World War he sent more troops, and provided money to buy a squadron of Hurricane fighter-planes. Some cheapskate! John Lord, *The Maharajahs*, 84.

B. OVERLORDS

The pattern was the same:

- the East India Company or the Raj had promised protection
- in return, it was overlord.

It could depose a prince who ruled badly.

It could decide who would replace him.

The prince had to be a fair and humane ruler.
   The British Resident would give advice.

The British Resident was always the man on the spot. He was sent out by the Political Department of the government in Delhi.

Viceroyys appointed Residents and Agents-General.

For the biggest states, a Resident had to be a prominent member of the Indian Civil Service –

someone who could have been a governor of a province in British India, but somehow was passed over for it

Some of the smaller states shared a Resident.

British agent-generals handled the smallest states ... say, 40 or 50 of them.

A good British Resident had to know the prince’s private life inside out

- was he outspending his means?
– was he being blackmailed?

– was he behaving so badly that there might be riots or poisonings?

Some spun webs of spies and informers.

They did a pretty good job of it, too: just before India got independence, the Raj burned 4 tons of documents about the private lives of the princes.

(no sense keeping it, where the new rulers could use it to blackmail or blackguard the princes).

A Resident had to make sure that princes knew their place.

They could not have a coat of arms with an arched crown on it.

The arched crown was for the Empress – or Emperor.

An open crown was all they were allowed.

Some Residents would use magnifying glasses to scrutinize coats of arms, to see if they broke the rule.41

Overlordship wasn’t just a matter of power or money.

It promoted peace. Goodness knows, princes had warred on each other for centuries. But now nobody could invade anyone.

Borders were formal, fixed.

Hindu against Moslem against Sikh would be a thing of the past.

The Raj also ran its overlordship lightly.

It didn’t have the time or the muscle to act as a nanny and chaperone.

That would have taken a tremendous intelligence machine, and Britain couldn’t afford that.

As one Britisher explained, “The most important part of a Resident’s job is what he doesn’t do.”

Residents, if they knew their business, saw to it that the Dewan, the Prime Minister, was a reliable figure.

It became the custom that a prince, choosing a Dewan, cleared it with the Political Department first.

... or even asked them for a list of possibilities.

Every so often, the choice was British, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service.

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By far the worst prince was the charming lord of Alwar.\(^{43}\)

(Its near Delhi and about half the size of New Jersey).

He thought himself a reincarnation of the god Rama.

All the other princes thought he was seriously deranged, scary, and an embarrassment.

Always, you saw him in black silk gloves, to avoid touching mortal flesh.

(He had a thing about leather, too: it terrified him, and the one way to insult him was to invite him to inspect your guard of honor – in leather jackets).\(^{44}\)

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He loved tiger hunting. His bait (it is said) worked every time – little kids.

His servants would grab them from villagers, and put them to use. Sometimes the kid came back, sometimes not.45

Young men wanting into the military academy for officers’ training had a quite peculiar test to pass ...

their performance in bed with him.46

And since one thing he enjoyed was pretty sadistic murders, a fair number of them never made it to die in combat.

All of this, the British Raj could overlook.

It took a display of very unsporting behavior to get him noticed.

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45 A wonderful story – but is it true? I am not sure. Other accounts say that it was rumored that he would capture and tie up old widows, but there are no recollections of the kids. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 227. And in John Lord, The Maharajahs, 206, where Collins and LaPierre probably got their information, the most it says is that one of the “wild tales” had it that he took babies for tiger bait.

46 The son of a rajah who visited Alwar told about his father’s reception: “My father was surprised to find when he got there that, instead of old and young courtiers, which was what most rulers have, this gentleman was only attended by extremely good-looking young men, all dressed in the same churidars and achkans as His Highness with safas (turbans) of the same type and color. Then there were boys ranged between ten and twenty years of age lining the steps of the marble staircase and as His Highness passed up the staircase with my father he would either pinch their cheeks or tweak their ears, which my father found very peculiar. In the evening there was a lot of anutch [dancing] and tamasha [fuss] with dancing girls and eventually my father excused himself and went to his room. He washed and said his prayers and then climbed into his bed, where, to his horror, he felt somebody next to him. He had a candle and lit it and found it was a nude young boy of about 10 or 11 who said, ‘Your Highness, I have been sent by my lord to entertain you.’ ‘Entertain me?’ said my father. ‘Look, Your Highness, I am clean,’ said this little boy – and pulled a silk handkerchief out of his bottom! ‘That’s it!’ said my father and threw him out of the room.” Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 160.
On a polo field, one of his ponies did badly in the match.

The prince was incensed. He had the horse soaked in kerosene right there, between plays, and personally lit the match to give it a permanent send-off.

That was too much, even for the British government.

He was deposed and kicked out of India.47

In Calcutta in 1891, the prince was overthrown by his brother.

Behind the new rajah was a third brother, who ran the army and had unusual influence – also a reputation for unusual cruelty.

When British authorities tried to have him arrested, there was a row.

The Chief Commissioner for Assam was invited into the royal palace, seized and beheaded.

47 Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, Freedom at Midnight, 189; Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 129. Alwar died, still in exile, in Paris. His body was specially embalmed for its return, and he was carried through the streets of his capital seated on his throne, in his best uniform, covered in jewels – but with sunglasses to protect his eyes. John Gunther, Inside Asia, 446, describes the wails of the crowd. But what he doesn’t tell us is why they wailed. Sitting on the throne, the Maharajah looked alive – except for the closed eyes. The sunglasses kept people from seeing it, and rumors swept the crowd that His Highness was alive and coming back to rule them again. And that was why the cries and people falling on their faces. They thought he’d been returned with a pardon – and he was very much hated. Many believed that he was being brought back to be burned alive – the only way to keep his wicked influence from going on any further.

There is, by the way, another story about his fall, and it is far more lurid than the polo ponies, and has to do with his sexual proclivities. Alwar had a heavy silver table centerpiece, with a hidden spring. When you leaned on it just so, a set of handcuffs came out and clicked shut around the victim’s hands – and the victim was then trapped and quite vulnerable for certain entertainments. This device Alwar tried out by inviting a young Englishman to lean over the table and put his hands in just the appropriate spot – trapping him, with the usual results – and usual consequences from those results. See Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, Lives of the Indian Princes (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 264-65.
The British residency was burned down.

Every important British official in town was killed.

So were the telegraphers.
The telegraph office went up in flames.
... along with the sanatorium.

Even British graves were desecrated.

The Raj had the forces to put the revolt down.

With artillery and discipline, 80 Ghurkas were able to rout
3000 Manipuri soldiers.\textsuperscript{48}

The killers were rounded up and executed.

The Raja’s palace got a first-class looting and then was burned to the
ground.

As for the commander in chief of the army, the power behind the throne...
he was carried to the local polo field, where there was
a scaffold all ready for him, and a crowd to watch him
hanged.\textsuperscript{49}

What we ought to notice more than the force, though, is the limits in what the Raj
felt it could do.

– it couldn’t have some other prince take over Manipur.

– it didn’t annex a single foot of ground

– it had to pick a new maharajah from the same family that had given it
maharajahs before.

\textsuperscript{48} Lawrence James, \textit{Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998),
330-332.

\textsuperscript{49} Lawrence James, \textit{Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India} , 332.
He was only six, so the British Resident would pull the strings for the next dozen years, and, meanwhile, he would get his training at Mayo College, a government-run academy for princes.50

Still, it was a long cry from fifty years before, when you conquered and overturned any princedom that got in your way.

Suttee, slavery, and the killing of baby girls went on for years in some realms before English rulers did anything about it.

Go to Manipur, up at the northern end of India. You could still find slavery there in the 1880s.

You didn’t have to look far: the Maharajah had 100 of them himself.

He gave them out as presents to people he liked.

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... and he was one of the more enlightened rulers!\textsuperscript{51}

A lot of rajahs had their own private armies, half-bodyguard and half bandit gang.

Robbing and killing some other prince’s subjects was out.

... but not robbing and killing your own’s!

Maybe in Rajputna you could find 74,000 of these vultures.

They shook down citizens using spears, muskets, and even a few stray cannons.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{The Soft Treatment}
Princes took a lot of gentle handling, and a lot of praise.

You gave them gifts and special honors...

degrees at Cambridge and Oxford

\textsuperscript{51} Lawrence James, \textit{Raj}, 326-27.

\textsuperscript{52} Lawrence James, \textit{Raj}, 328.
stars of the Order of the Indian Empire

or the Order of the Star of India

Why be “His Highness” when you can be “His Exalted Highness,” which only the Nizam could be?

And why be “His Exalted Highness,” when like the 7th Nizam of Hyderabad, you could be:

“Lieutenant-General
His Exalted Highness Seventh in Line Equal to the Rank of Asaf Jah,
Victor of the Realm and the World, Regulator of the Realm,
Regulator of the State,
Viceroy Sir the Honourable Osman Ali Khan,
the Brave, Victorious in Battle, Faithful Ally of the British,
Grand Commander of the Star of India,
Knight Grand Cross of the British Empire,
Nizam of Hyderabad and Berar”?

A good prince could get a special honor of riding as honorary guards behind the King’s carriage when he was crowned.

Where he stood compared to other princes depended on how much respect the Raj showed him.


54 In the case of the princes of Cooch, Behar, Patiala and Gwalior, for the coronation of Edward VII. Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, Freedom at Midnight, 177.
And that was a matter of guns – how many guns to a salute?

If you were a special friend of the King’s, you could get a 9-gun salute or a 11-gun, or 13-gun salute.

If you were a truly special friend of the King, you got 15 guns.\(^{55}\)

For special, truly special friends of the King, you got a 17-gun salute.\(^{56}\)

For extra-special super friends of the King, you got 19 guns.\(^{57}\)

And if you were one of the five at the top\(^ {58}\), the ones who were a MUST in defense of India –

well, you got the works: TWENTY ONE GUNS.

Some 425 princes didn’t get any salute at all.\(^{59}\)

If you behaved badly, England took a few guns off your salute, too.

Princes took those salutes seriously.

By custom, the British never fired salutes on Sundays.

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55 Like, for instance, the Maharaja of Alwar and sixteen others.

56 Thirteen did, one being the Nawab of Bahawalpur. Geoffrey Moorhouse, *India Britannica*, 136.

57 Six got it: the Nawab of Bhopal, the Maharajah of Indore, the Khan of Kalat, the Majaraja of Kohalpur, and the Maharajas of Travancore and of Udaipur. Geoffrey Moorhouse, *India Britannica*, 136.


So some princes, coming into Delhi on a Sunday, would stay in their royal trains all day, so that on Monday morning when they got out, they could have the guns go off.  

It sounds silly. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t.

The more guns you got, the less Overlord you got.

A prince who got no salute was sure to get a Political Agent visiting every three months, asking to go over the books.

A prince with a high enough salute knew that the Agent would come like an ambassador, rather than an auditor.

He would visit, show proper respect, request, and not insist too hard.

And if you got 19 guns or more, then the only person who would come nosing into your affairs would be the Viceroy.

You were mostly left alone.

The higher the salute, the less meddling you got.  

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As the Twig is Bent

What the Raj did do was steer the rising generation right.

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Princes’ children were sent to colleges the British ran, and taught good British habits.

By no accident, when Sir Bhupinder Singh the Magnificent died, his son, the 8th Maharajah of Patiala, closed the 350-woman harem.

The new Maharajah of Gwalior felt uncomfortable in the enormous palace, and moved into a smaller house.\(^{62}\)

It also worked to make the princes feel that if the Raj prospered, they prospered; if it fell, they fell.

So British rule meant a string of Indian private schools, paid for by the Raj, and open to the landowning aristocracy’s sons.

– they learned cricket and rugby

– they ate good English cooking (Indian food, once a week)

– they were taught to dress for dinner in a dinner jacket

– when the Derby or Grand National was run, they all had to listen to it on BBC.

– bird-watching was a compulsory activity\(^{63}\)

\(^{62}\) Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, \textit{Freedom at Midnight}, 178.

They couldn’t make the princes attend, and at first, mostly, they didn’t.

They didn’t want to go to FINISHING SCHOOL. They wanted to learn talents!
Their children went to Hindu and Moslem institutions, to learn law, literature, logic ...
and maybe some Persian and Arabic.

It took reforms around the turn of the century to give British colleges their appeal...

more training in politics and economics
an exam on leaving. 64

But there were good reasons why the princes would want to show up.

Your life and livelihood depend on understand the Overlords.

You have to see what it means to be English, if you want to deal with these people.

CODA: ENGLAND ISN’T ANOTHER COUNTRY

All in all, the impact of the British could be considerable.
One prince later explained:

64 Lawrence James, Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 335-36.
“When I was a boy we had English officers who were in charge of the police. English principals in charge of schools, the railways were manned by British people, and Indians and British played tennis together. States ... were all trying to bring British technology into their states, the English language itself was a very binding force and for three hundred years these two countries had lived together. So to my generation England isn’t another country.”