Dethroned

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Patel, Menon and the Integration of Princely India

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juggernaut

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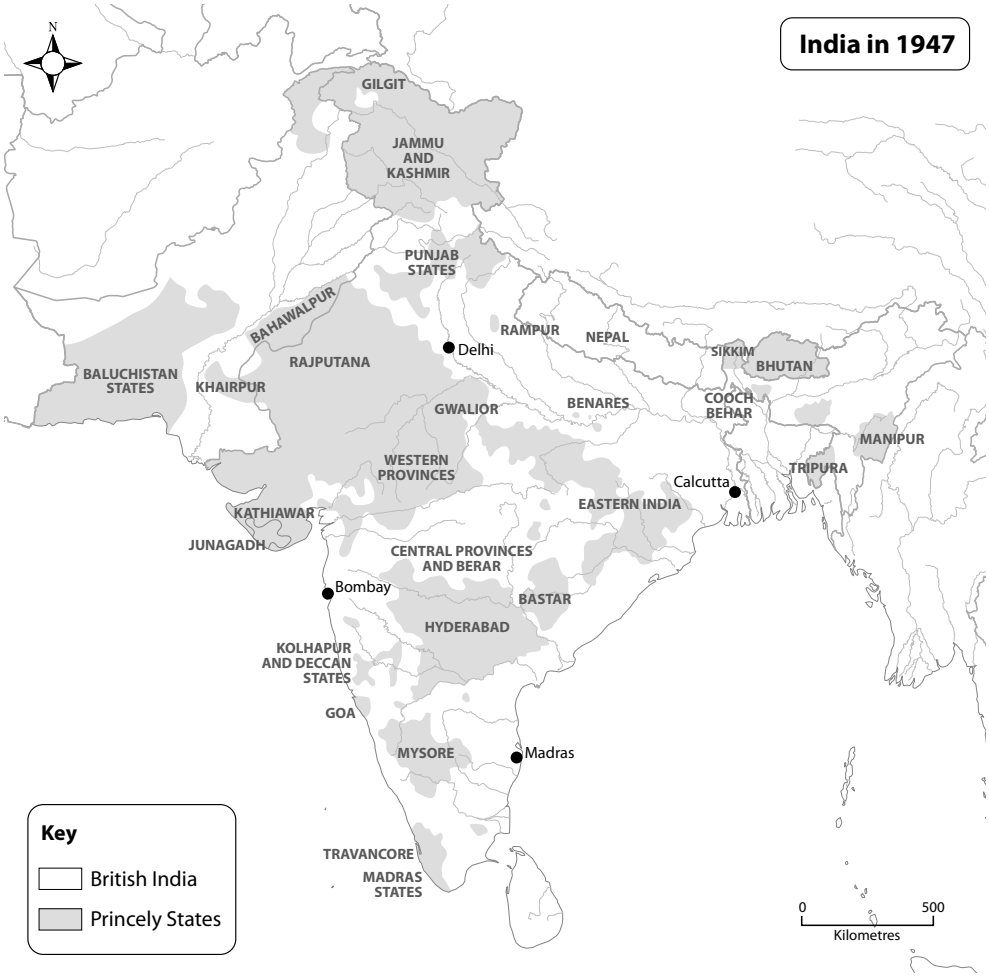
India in 1947
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RAMPUR
NEPAL
SIKKIM
BHUTAN
Delhi
RAJPUTANA
BALUCHISTAN STATES
KHAIRPUR
GWALIOR
BENARES
COOCH BEHAR
MANIPUR
WESTERN PROVINCES
TRIPURA
Calcutta
EASTERN INDIA
KATHIAWAR
JUNAGADH
CENTRAL PROVINCES AND BERAR
Bombay
BASTAR
HYDERABAD
KOLHAPUR AND DECCAN STATES
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MYSORE
Madras
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Key
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Princely States
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Prologue: The Last Durbar

India was beginning to burn. Communal violence was erupting across large swathes of the Punjab and Bengal. In the rubble-strewn laneways of Lahore, the grey light of dawn revealed the bodies of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs massacred the night before. Those who had not fled the smouldering cities and towns battled each other with bricks, stones and home-made bombs. Blood turned the waters of canals a dull red and congealed in parched and abandoned wheat fields. Yet the potentates who assembled in the Chamber of Princes (COP) in Delhi on 25 July 1947 seemed oblivious to the butchery. Nearly one hundred rajas, maharajas, maharaj ranas, khans, nawabs and dewans were meeting as a body for the last time in the Council House, the huge circular Herbert Baker–designed building that would house the future Parliament of independent India. Never to miss an opportunity to turn on an audacious display of pomp and privilege, they arrived bedecked in richly embroidered achkans buttoned up to their necks, belts studded with sapphires, rubies radiating from their turbans to their shoe buckles. In just three weeks, half a century of nationalist struggle would culminate in Britain's departure. From his quarters in the Viceregal Estate, Sir Cyril Radcliffe was consulting census reports as he finalized the

boundaries of the new dominions of India and Pakistan. In offices around the subcontinent, officials were furiously calculating the final division of everything from rolling stock to rice reserves, from typewriters to telephones. The only uncertainty that remained was how the 562 princely states[1] – a motley collection once described as 'the oddest political set-up that the world has ever seen' – would fit into this new paradigm.[2]

It was not just the heat on that day – a stifling 44.5 degrees Celsius – that was piling discomfort on an already prickly and politically charged summer. Just a week earlier, the Indian Independence Act had received royal assent. It provided for the handover of power to two new dominions on 15 August. All treaties with the British Crown would lapse, technically leaving the princes free to join either India or Pakistan, or if they chose, to declare themselves independent. Among the princes, the imminent departure of the Raj evoked a range of emotions. A handful had accepted the inevitability of independence and the necessity of preparing for the new realities it would bring. Many palpably dreaded and resented what they saw as their future once Britain's political and military protection was withdrawn. Despite the provisions of the Independence Act, they would, they feared, be absorbed into the new India against their will. Their autocratic powers and privileges would be washed away, their palaces and treasuries seized, their right to impose customs duties and earn royalties on their mineral wealth wrested from them, and their personal fortunes taxed. They could keep their Rolls-Royces and royal stables, but these would be empty symbols of lost prestige. Hallowed decorations and knighthoods bestowed by the King Emperor in return for their loyalty would be a thing of the past.

The remainder had adopted a posture of insouciant denial. When the former Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer Philip Mason

arrived in Hyderabad in 1946 to tutor the two grandsons of Nizam Osman Ali Khan, he found the nobility carrying on as if nothing was about to change. At a garden party, a sixty-piece string orchestra conducted by an Anglo-Indian named Henry Luschwitz played waltzes and foxtrots. 'It was like the spring of 1789 at Versailles . . . The men were elegant in black sherwanis or gorgeous in gold brocade, the ladies wore saris of sapphire or flame-colour or starlit blue . . . Everyone seemed to be happy and witty and amused.'[3]

As the rulers and their representatives waited for the entrance of Lord Louis Mountbatten, conflicting rumours swept through the assemblage. Some heard that India's last viceroy was about to declare the princes independent, others that he would make a dramatic announcement that would effectively sever the century-old sacred compact between the Crown and its feudatories. Entering the chamber, Mountbatten seemed to draw strength from the heat like a salamander. Dressed in his full viceregal ivory-white uniform, 'his chest flashing with a breastplate of orders, decorations, and medals', he looked every inch the cousin of the British monarch King George VI.[4]

Walking on the red carpet alongside him was the imposing figure of Vallabhbhai Patel, the head of the recently formed States Department. His broad and heavy features and glassy, hooded eyes gave the impression of a man worn down by years of struggle. Yet the seventy-two-year-old politician, described by one nationalist leader as 'a rough diamond in an iron casket',[5] was the most powerful figure inside the Congress party after the interim prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Patel kept the cogs of Congress turning by wooing industrialists to fill the party's coffers, while acting as a brake against its more radical elements. Had he achieved his ambition of becoming India's first prime minister, his centrist pro-market ideology would have seen the country take a radically different

course from the socialist model espoused by Nehru. Today, Patel is often called the 'Bismarck of India' for repeating the German chancellor's feat of cajoling a group of scattered and disparate princedoms into giving up their sovereignty and creating a cohesive nation state. In reality, as his biographer D.V. Tahmankar notes: 'the task in India was infinitely more difficult and complex' than Bismarck's, with not dozens but hundreds of potentates 'reluctant to give up ancestral estates, great privileges and ruling powers'.[6] Writing a few months after Independence, a Western journalist described Patel as 'a Hindu Cromwell courteously decapitating hundreds of little King Charleses', in the process turning the princes into pensioners and giving their subjects political unity and a voice they had never known before.[7] This feat drew admiration from some unlikely quarters, including the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, who exclaimed: 'You Indians are a remarkable people. How did you manage to liquidate the princely states without liquidating the princes?'[8]

The feat was not Patel's alone. In fact, the real architect of the accession and integration of the states was a diminutive Malayali with a penchant for Savile Row suits, Cuban cigars and slate-blue Cadillacs. Over a remarkable three-decade-long career, Vappala Pangunni (V.P.) Menon had gone from being a coolie in the mines of the Kolar Gold Fields to holding the highest position in the government ever held by an Indian, serving as reforms commissioner and constitutional adviser to three viceroys, Lord Linlithgow, Lord Wavell and now Mountbatten. It was the slightly rotund, balding and bespeckled Menon, the secretary of the States Department, who had come up with the deceptively simple plan of accession limited to three subjects – defence, foreign affairs and communications – which would be used, to great effect, to disarm the princes. In the weeks and months to come, Patel's powerful

personality, which mixed fury with charm and persuasion with coercion, would complement Menon's skills as a tactician. When Patel, in a rare moment of hesitation, expressed unease that the departure of the British would mean that treaties would be torn up and undertakings abandoned, Menon responded: 'We start with a clean slate. It is now our turn to say how the princes will behave.'[9] This frankness would appeal to Patel, who would increasingly rely on the man who became his deputy in the States Department to formulate and implement the policies that would ultimately redraw the map of India.

Missing from the historic conclave was the only British official who knew each of the rulers personally. Conrad Corfield, the viceroy's adviser on the princely states until his position and powers were taken over by Patel and Menon, had submitted his resignation and boarded a plane for London just a few days earlier. Indian nationalists regarded Corfield as the man who wanted to Balkanize India by encouraging the states to exercise their legal right to choose between the two dominions or to become independent entities. After serving in the states for more than three decades, Corfield believed it was his job to protect the princes' interests and their bargaining power. He was also convinced that Mountbatten was about to make a set of promises to the princes that he could not guarantee. One of Corfield's final acts had been to destroy thousands of secret files maintained by the British on the often-scandalous private lives of India's potentates.

Also striking in their absence were the princes who had ignored Mountbatten's invitation to attend the COP meeting. Chief among them were Indore's ruler Yeshwant Rao Holkar and the nawab of Bhopal, Hamidullah Khan. The pair were viewed by Patel, Menon and others in the States Department as the co-conspirators of a scheme to plunge 'a dagger into the very heart of India' by lobbying

a slew of contiguous states to accede to Pakistan. Borrowing a metaphor from Lewis Carroll, Hamidullah said he felt that the princes had been invited 'like the oysters to attend the tea party with the walruses and the carpenters'.[10] (By the end of Carroll's poem, the oysters get gobbled up by their hosts.) Other notable absentees were the dewan of Travancore, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, and the mightiest ruler of all, the dangerously eccentric Osman Ali Khan of Hyderabad. Bhopal, Hyderabad and Travancore had declared their states would become independent once the British departed, with Aiyar adamant that his maharaja took orders from God and no one else. Inspired by the example of these three states, other headstrong potentates were re-evaluating their future too.

As Mountbatten took his place on the dais, the gloom seemed to lift, and a frisson of excitement mixed with anticipation filled the room where, for the past quarter century, India's chiefs had tried in vain to overcome their divisions and petty feuds and face their challenges head-on. If there was anything resembling a consensus among them as they waited for Mountbatten to begin his speech, it was the view that as a blue-blooded royal with a passion for polo and pigsticking, Mountbatten would prove an ally when they needed one the most. He knew many of the princes personally, counting among his close friends the maharajas of Bikaner and Jaipur and the Nawab of Bhopal. Only the canniest of those present noticed a slight but significant departure from tradition. Normally, only the viceroy occupied the dais. This time a special seat was prepared for Patel – a placement the Maharawal of Dungarpur interpreted as a not-so-subtle signal that the tide was turning against the princes. After ruling over nearly half of India's land mass and holding the power of life and death over a third of its population, their day of reckoning had come.

Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee is said to have chosen

Mountbatten to oversee India's independence because he could 'not only talk the hind leg off a donkey but also the throne from under a prince'.[11] For the next hour, the viceroy lived up to this estimation, speaking without notes and giving one of the most impressive performances of his long career – 'the apogee of persuasion', as Menon later put it.[12] Using every weapon in his oratorical armoury, Mountbatten told the princes that he was about to present them with a 'take it or leave it' offer, which would not be repeated. They would be given instruments to sign, which provided for accession on just three subjects – defence, foreign affairs and communications. Their internal affairs would be left untouched. There would be no financial liability on the part of the states, nor would the central government have any power to encroach on their internal autonomy or sovereignty. It was a bargain so advantageous, Mountbatten assured them, that he wasn't even sure the Indian government would accept it. 'My scheme leaves you with all the practical independence you can possibly use and makes you free of all those subjects which you cannot possibly manage on your own.' The core message from the speech, and one that made the headlines in Indian newspapers the following day, was: 'You cannot run away from the Dominion Government which is your neighbour any more than you can run away from subjects for whose welfare you are responsible.' Playing to their love of titles, Mountbatten told the assembled monarchs that if they signed on the dotted line, there was every likelihood that Patel and the Congress would not interfere with their receiving honours and titles from the king.[13] He also issued a blunt reminder – one that would come back to haunt the Indian government as it grappled with the Kashmir crisis:

> The States are theoretically free to link their future with whichever Dominion they may care [to]. But when I say that they are at

> liberty to link up with either of the Dominions, may I point out that there are certain geographical compulsions which cannot be evaded. Out of something like 565 States, the vast majority are irretrievably linked . . . with the Dominion of India.[14]

'His control of the meeting never faltered,' writes Mountbatten's biographer Philip Ziegler. 'He sensed precisely when to curdle the blood with fearful prophesies, when to relieve them with a joke.'[15] Answering questions from the floor, Mountbatten at one point resorted to pantomime, 'reading' an absent prince's mind with the aid of a paperweight that he pretended was a crystal ball. Should this absent prince sign the Instrument of Accession? he asked the paperweight. The answer was, of course, yes. While the gag elicited some laughter from those assembled, by the end of the gathering, 'the expression on the face of even the richest of them was the sad, lost look of men in defeat'.[16] Buried beneath the gravitas was the fact that Mountbatten was making promises on behalf of entities that had yet to come into existence, namely, the dominions of India and Pakistan. Sessions of the COP normally lasted two days. This final one lasted less than two hours. The princes were told that the viceroy was preoccupied with other matters and had to leave.

Having observed the reaction to the speech, Mountbatten's press secretary Alan Campbell-Johnson saw how the princes, 'leaderless, riven with dynastic and political dissensions, tried desperately to hide behind opportunism and indecision, but events were moving much too fast and on too large a scale to allow of any such halting tactics'.[17] Mountbatten's immediate assessment of the gathering was blunter. 'Very few of the Princes or their representatives seemed to have any idea of what was going on around them. Unless they accepted the Instrument they would be finished',[18] swept away by the forces of nationalism that were opposed to autocratic rule. That

afternoon, Campbell-Johnson and Menon prepared a sanitized official transcript of the speech Mountbatten had delivered. 'He threatened sanctions – such as withholding arms, ammunitions and other supplies – against States not agreeing to accede,' his joint private secretary, W.H.J. Christie noted in his diary. He also let Travancore's absent dewan 'have it' for daring to make overtures to Britain and the United Nations and pledged to do 'everything in his power' to make life difficult for the state if it continued to resist joining India.[19] Mountbatten was determined to go down in history as the man who brought the princes to heel. He would show no pity to those who dared oppose him.

While the viceroy projected unshakeable confidence, Patel and Menon were watchful. A slew of states from Travancore on the Malabar coast to tiny Bilaspur in the Himalayan foothills were daring to dream of independence. Filled with dread at the prospect of acceding to either India or Pakistan, Kashmir's Maharaja Hari Singh was clinging to the belief that his state could become the 'Switzerland of the East'. The leader of the Muslim League Muhammad Ali Jinnah was busy wooing future border states such as Jodhpur as well as Sikh princes, thrusting blank sheets of paper in front of them and promising to agree to any terms for accession they demanded. In Alwar and Bharatpur, Muslims were attempting to join forces with their co-religionists in the Punjab to form an independent Meostan, while the Jats hankered for a separate Jatistan. Dholpur's ruler believed he had a divine right to do what he wanted. Kathiawar had to be brought to heel when word leaked out that several of this peninsula's princely states might form a union and ally with Pakistan. In Rampur, the nawab briefly flirted

with acceding only to be forced to appeal for outside intervention to prevent his state from descending into communal bloodshed when he rejected Jinnah's overtures. Even Gwalior, a state so pro-British that its ruler George Jiwajirao Scindia was named after the king of England, deviated from the path laid out by the viceroy by begging at the last moment to be allowed to determine its own future.

The urgency with which the princes were being dealt with stemmed from the very real fear that while an India deprived of its eastern and western wings because of Partition would survive, an India deprived of its states would lose 'all coherence'. In an influential essay published in 1944, the constitutional expert Reginald Coupland wrote:

> [The states] form a great cruciform barrier separating all four quarters of the country. If no more than the Central Indian States and Hyderabad and Mysore were excluded from the Union, the United Provinces would be almost completely cut off from Bombay, and Bombay completely from Sind. The strategic and economic implications are obvious enough. The practicability of Pakistan must be admitted, but the more the separation of the States from British India is considered, the more impracticable it seems. India could live if its Moslem limbs in the North-West and North-East were amputated, but could it live without its heart?[20]

Mountbatten would later congratulate himself for giving Patel and Menon what they wanted: the accession of all but a handful of the hundreds of disparate states in the space of just a few weeks. The new dominion gained political cohesion, land and money. By the end of 1949, it had added 13 lakh square kilometres of territory and more than 9 crore subjects, easily offsetting what it had lost

because of Partition. One estimate put the total value of public holdings transferred from the princes to the new Indian Union to be around Rs 100 crore. But there were costs. The process was nowhere near as painless or as bloodless as its architects would assert – the most obvious exception to this claim being the thousands of lives lost during the misnamed 'Police Action' in Hyderabad. The nizam's doomed attempt to exercise his legal right to independence resulted in at least 25,000 lives lost and the displacement of many thousands more. And accession was not 'in itself a final solution', as Menon put it – an unfortunate choice of phrase, given its Nazi echoes – to the problem of the states. That would require Patel and him to roll back their promises not to interfere in the princes' internal affairs. The map of India would have to be redrawn, ancient boundaries erased and once-proud lineages reduced to scraps of paper.

The motivations of the main players in this endgame of empire differed greatly. For Congress leaders, the princely states were bastions of despotism, debauchery and decay. Nehru derided them as 'sinks of reaction and incompetence and unrestrained autocratic power, sometimes exercised by vicious and degraded individuals'.[21] Corfield and others who had served in them, including many Indian dewans, ministers and administrators, took a more nuanced view. Yes, there were tyrants who should have been deposed had it not been for their usefulness to the British, but there were also many states such as Mysore, Baroda and Aundh where indigenous rule was benevolent, devoid of communal friction, based on a stable social structure and carried out in an atmosphere of security and loyalty. Given time, it would be possible for the princes to put their houses in order. While Nehru was making no secret of his abhorrence of feudal autocracy, the father of Hindutva, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, saw the states as representing the true India,

'portals to a pure, ancient past', and even as 'the foundation on which the future nation' could be launched.[22] As for the princes, all but the most myopic had some inkling that the tide of history was turning against them, that the prospect of dozens of 'mini Ulsters' made up of larger states exercising their right to independence and of small states creating their own federations would never be tolerated by the leaders of a newly independent dominion of India or Pakistan.

Aside from a voluminous amount of archival material available in India and Great Britain, anyone working on the princely states can draw on a wealth of excellent scholarship, including Ian Copland's *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire:1917–1947,* Stephen Ashton's *British Policy Towards the Indian States: 1905–1939* and Barbara Ramusack's *The Indian Princes and Their States*. These have been supplemented in recent years by the publication of several outstanding books on individual states, their rulers and administrators, notably Manu Pillai's *The Ivory Throne* and *False Allies*, and Rahul Sagar's *The Progressive Maharaj*. Scholarship on the princely states that found themselves within the borders of Pakistan remains sparse, with the exception of Yaqoob Khan Bangash's *A Princely Affair* and Anabel Lloyd's *Bahawalpur: The Kingdom that Vanished.* Even when taken together, these surveys leave unanswered questions of what happened to the states after Partition, what motivated men like Menon and Patel to work so hard to integrate them into the new India and what agency the princes retained as they adjusted to a democratic order that increasingly viewed them as anachronisms.

Drawing on confidential government and diplomatic reports as well as the correspondence and writings of the main protagonists, the following pages attempt to fill this gap by charting the story of India's centuries-old princely order, from the arrival of

Mountbatten as viceroy in March 1947 until the abolition of titles, privileges and privy purses in December 1971. This three-part drama was enacted with ruthless determination against the backdrop of the subcontinent's bloody division and its aftermath. Act One opens with the sudden and unscripted sprint to independence as Menon and Patel, aided by Mountbatten, arm-twisted hundreds of absolute autocrats to sign away their kingdoms and become part of the new India. Not all were ready to surrender without a fight. Encouraged by Corfield and Jinnah, states such as Bhopal, Jodhpur and Indore were taking their cue from Britain's promise that they would be free to determine their own future following the transfer of power. Act Two took longer but was no less dramatic: the integration of the states into new units or their merger with existing provinces. The threat to India's territorial integrity thrown up by Junagadh's accession to Pakistan, the tribal invasion of Kashmir and Hyderabad's declaration of independence brought the two dominions perilously close to war, unleashed communal tensions and widened the rift between Patel and Nehru. Once proudly independent princes were coaxed and coerced into giving up their powers with new administrative posts, privy purses that were guaranteed for life and privileges that the ordinary Indian could hardly comprehend. During this second act, the constant redrawing of the map of India would have taxed the patience of the most talented cartographers – the boundaries of just one state, Rajasthan, going through several iterations in the space of a single year. Threatened by the growing power of the princes on the political stage and desperate to shore up her political credentials, Indira Gandhi emerged as the chief protagonist in the final act of this drama. Wielding her parliamentary sword, and with the help of a compliant president, she deftly and definitively consigned the princely order to the history books.

Until the final curtain call, the princes were undermined by division and delusion, their parochial perspective of their importance and their God-given rights curtailing their ability to manoeuvre in the rapidly changing circumstances they found themselves in. Whether or not the rulers were responsible for the debacle of their own downfall, whether their demise was premeditated or inevitable, the story of the unmaking of the princely order and those who orchestrated it is an inseparable part of India's story. It deserves to be told.

1

The 'Iron Man' and the Civil Servant

A brass band and a full bodyguard were waiting for Rear Admiral Viscount Louis Mountbatten of Burma and his wife Edwina when their York transporter landed at Delhi's Palam airport on 22 March 1947. As India's last viceroy stepped onto the tarmac, he felt overjoyed to be 'endowed with an almost heavenly power. I realised that I had been made into the most powerful man on earth. One fifth of humanity I held in my hand. A power of life and death.'[1]

The couple's arrival marked the start of a summer of discontent. As he followed Mountbatten off the plane, Alan Campbell-Johnson was overcome by a sense of despair. Everywhere the viceroy's press attaché looked the situation seemed hopeless. The British government had made a pledge to the Indian people without knowing how to implement it. The worst rioting and communal violence in a century had left thousands dead, mostly Sikhs at the hands of Muslims, in Rawalpindi and Multan. The Congress and the Muslim League were at loggerheads. Partition seemed inevitable. 'In short, we have the people rioting, the Princes falling out among themselves, the entire Indian Civil Service and Police running down, and the British, who are left sceptical and

full of foreboding.'[2] When a sullen Lord Wavell met Mountbatten at the Viceregal Lodge later that day to brief him on the handover, he handed him a manilla file titled 'Operation Madhouse'. 'This is called "Madhouse" because it is a problem for a madhouse,' Wavell explained, referring to the crisis engulfing the subcontinent. 'Alas, I can see no other way out.'[3]

Attlee's announcement to the House of Commons on 10 February 1947 of Mountbatten's appointment was followed by a declaration ten days later that Britain would transfer power into 'responsible Indian hands' no later than June 1948.[4] To achieve this would need a new personal approach. During Mountbatten's first two weeks in India, that personal approach translated into a staggering 133 meetings with ministers in the interim government, commanders-in-chief of the armed services, leading princes and other prominent figures. Jinnah scored the lion's share, meeting Mountbatten no fewer than six times.

On 26 March, two days after his brief swearing-in ceremony, it was the turn of the interim home minister in the Constituent Assembly Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. In late 1946, Wavell wrote to King George VI giving his frank assessment of the leading figures in the nationalist movement. Gandhi was a 'shrewd, malevolent politician' prone to making pronouncements 'so qualified and so vaguely worded' they can 'be interpreted in whatever sense best suits him at a later stage'. Jinnah was a 'lonely unhappy, arbitrary, self-centred man'. Abdul Kalam Azad, the Congress president, 'stood for good sense, but up against Gandhi he was a rabbit faced by a stoat'. Nehru, though 'sincere, intelligent and personally courageous', was 'unbalanced'. The only individual Wavell expressed unconditional support for was Patel, whom he upheld as 'the recognized tough of the Congress Working Committee and by far the most forceful character amongst them'. Patel, he added, was 'the only one . . .

capable of standing up to Gandhi'.[5] Historians would go on to nickname him the 'Iron Man' of India.

When Campbell-Johnson first saw the dhoti-wearing Patel, he was reminded of a Roman emperor in a toga. 'There are in fact Roman qualities about this man – administrative talent, capacity to take and sustain strong decisions, and a certain serenity, which invariably accompanies real strength of character. Despite his preoccupations, Patel had a shrewd grasp of India's strategic position in the world at large.'[6] Given his reputation as a blunt-mannered, hard-boiled, self-declared 'fascist' when it came to dealing with dissenters in his own party, Mountbatten had been somewhat apprehensive ahead of the meeting. Patel, for his part, had low expectations of the new viceroy, who he dismissed as 'a toy for Jawaharlalji to play with while we arrange the revolution'.[7] By the end of their encounter, however, mutual reservations had evaporated with Mountbatten describing the Congress strongman as 'most charming . . . evincing a considerable sense of humour'.[8] Like Mountbatten himself, he was a pragmatist and a realist, a politician refreshingly free of the complexities of Nehru and Gandhi. And as Patel now saw it, Mountbatten's 'royal status and personal friendship with many of the princes was uniquely suited to help India achieve its aim of leaving no state behind'.[9]

Nationalism ran in Patel's blood. The son of a petty landowner who had fought alongside the Rani of Jhansi in the Mutiny of 1857, he was born in 1875 in the village of Nadiad, approximately 60 kilometres southeast of Ahmedabad. The young Patel would inherit his father's fiery spirit. While in sixth class, he organized a three-day strike to protest against the harsh treatment of a fellow student who had been caned for failing to pay a fine. He went on to become a pleader in criminal cases in the district court in Borsad, where he practised as a barrister for eight years. Patel's steely

determination and single-mindedness were evident even then. In 1909, while he was giving the final speech for the defence in a court case in Bombay, his wife Jhaverba died after undergoing surgery for cancer. Patel was given a note about his wife's demise, pocketed it, continued his summing up and won the case. He broke the news to others only after the proceedings had ended. The following year, aged thirty-five, he sailed for London, renting a room in the neighbourhood of Bayswater and working with relentless resolve to pass his Bar exams. On his return to Gujarat three years later, he set up a successful legal practice with his elder brother Vithalbhai.

At the time, in the words of biographer Balraj Krishna, Patel was 'an unabashed scoffer; a smart young man dressed in tip-top English style', a bridge-playing, chain-smoking barrister 'sardonically scanning the Indian political scene from the seclusion of his "fritters club" at Ahmedabad'.[10] His first encounter with Gandhi came in 1916 shortly after the latter's return from South Africa. When Gandhi walked into the Gujarat Club Patel's companions all stood up and rushed to greet him. Patel reportedly remained seated and scoffed at his fellow Gujaratis, sarcastically commenting that he was not interested in lessons on how to clean toilets.

Just a year later, Patel had given up smoking and bridge-playing, quit his legal practice, ditched his tailored suits and donned a dhoti to become one of Gandhi's most trusted lieutenants. While he has left nothing on record to explain his change of heart, it's likely that the rebel spirit he had shown at school attracted him to the Mahatma's campaigns among peasants in Bihar and Gujarat. In 1918, the two men worked together to organize the Nadiad satyagraha in Gujarat over the unjust collection of land tax. When Gandhi departed for Indore a few days after the satyagraha started, Patel took over, showing a remarkable capacity for leadership. 'If Gandhi had a bania's suave, courteous veneer hiding his firmness

and determination, Patel had the bluntness of a soldier and the astuteness of an organiser,' Krishna notes.[11] With Gandhi's blessings, Patel went on to arrange the annual meeting of the Congress in Ahmedabad in 1921. The meeting was a watershed moment, consolidating the party's evolution from what Nehru would describe as 'an English-knowing, upper-class affair' where morning coats and well-pressed trousers were greatly in evidence, into a mass grassroots movement.[12] Six years later, Patel led the Bardoli satyagraha. For weeks he cajoled peasants to refuse all payments to the government. Despite arrests, confiscation of property and other pressures, he held the peasants firm until Gandhi stepped in with a proposal of mediation. Noted the *Times of India*: 'Iron discipline prevails in Bardoli. Mr Patel had instituted there a Bolshevik regime in which he plays the role of Lenin.'[13] From then he was known as Gandhi's 'deputy commander' and as 'Sardar', a title that means chief. But the closeness between the two men would not always work in Patel's favour. In 1946, Gandhi ignored the preferences of the party's rank and file and chose Nehru over the more experienced Patel for the role of Congress president. The choice meant it was Nehru who would be the prime minister of newly independent India and the country's face to the world.

Patel's first brush with the princes came in March 1928, when he arranged a dinner party at which the invitees included Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, Motilal Nehru, the freedom fighters Sarojini Naidu and Lajpat Rai, as well as Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Patiala's ruler recalled how Patel served up a piquant warning that the states would be eliminated if they attempted to block British India's march to freedom. From then on there was little ambiguity in his attitude. In 1929, he gave an address to the fifth Kathiawar Political Conference, a grassroots organization set up to give a political voice to the people of the region, in which he decried

the situation in the states as being 'disorderly and pitiable . . . For the Princes to claim the Empire's friendship is sheer nonsense, like friendship between a lion and a jackal!' he exclaimed.[14] The expansion in the early 1930s of Praja Mandals, public associations encouraged by the Congress but independent of it, which pressured the states to introduce constitutional reforms, saw Patel's attitude harden even further. 'The red and yellow colours on India's map have to be made one,' he declared, referring to the colours used to distinguish princely India (yellow) from British India in the official maps of the time. 'Unless that is done, we cannot have Swaraj.'[15]

Throughout his rise in the Congress, Patel's mantra was that the states must introduce responsible government and guarantee fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and association to their citizens. To him a ruler was just a trustee:

> He is enjoying the right inherited from his parents; so in every country when the king becomes worthless people have a right to dethrone him. But in our country, our forefathers made us ultra-loyal, and that is the reason why we are being suppressed . . . The worst disease that spreads from power is sycophancy. Rulers like to hear sweet things about them but that is in fact sedition. To tell truth and bitter things is real loyalty. But today everything is being overturned.[16]

Patel's writings and speeches also reflect his utter disdain for princely autocracy:

> There are six hundred native states in India. There is no country in the world which has so many states. Some states are so small that even a person who rules over six or seven villages announces himself a ruler. Simply because the kings wear a crown, they do not

> become totally independent. They are also slaves, and we who are their subjects are slaves of slaves.[17]

When dealing with crises in the princely states, Patel was a fast learner. In 1938, he met with the Maharaja of Mysore and his dewan, Mirza Ismail, to defuse clashes between Congress workers and state forces over the hoisting of the tricoloured national flag on 26 January, which was being marked as India's future Independence Day. Patel's negotiations resulted in a settlement which would see the Mysore state flag flying alongside the Congress flag at all ceremonial occasions involving the party. For its part, the Mysore government expressed deep regret over the misunderstanding that had caused the crisis and the resulting deaths and injuries. But Patel also recommended that the Congress mellow its approach to the states:

> I do not think it is unpatriotic to have friendly relations with States' officials. You must remember that they are Indian States and not foreign States. The struggle for freedom under the aegis of the Indian National Congress is freedom for 350 million people including Indian States' people and Indian Princes. Once the Princes are free, we shall settle our accounts with them without third party intervention.[18]

No sooner had the Mysore crisis been defused than another broke out in Rajkot on the Kathiawar peninsula. Following the death of the state's widely respected ruler, Lakhajirajsinhji, his eldest, somewhat wayward, son Dharmendrasinhji was placed on the gaddi. He promptly dismissed his father's elected assembly. Patel launched a highly effective campaign to restore the assembly, which included strikes, withholding of land revenue, boycotts of

cotton produced at the state's mills, an embargo on electricity from the state power station and even a run on the state bank. Dharmendrasinhji caved in and agreed to the formation of a committee to reconstitute the assembly. At this point the British blocked Patel's nominees to the assembly. Meanwhile, the state's dewan, Durbar Virawala, responded to the campaign to restore the assembly by clamping down on political activities and jailing activists, including Patel's daughter Maniben and Gandhi's wife Kasturba. In January 1938, Gandhi went to Rajkot, a city he had lived in for thirteen years as a young man, and threatened to fast unto death unless Virawala released all those jailed and accepted Patel's nominees. During Gandhi's visit, a Muslim mob attacked a meeting he was addressing, looking to kill Patel. Finally, the then viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, intervened and left the final decision to his chief justice, who supported Patel's position. The assembly was restored.

Although he did not fully appreciate it at first, Mountbatten had on his staff one of the most capable civil servants India had ever produced. V.P. Menon was the head of the Reforms Commission, the highest office held by an Indian in the bureaucracy of the Raj. Wavell, the former viceroy, had been suspicious of him, regarding him as Patel's 'mouthpiece'.[19] Mountbatten's private secretary, George Abell, feared Menon might leak some of the viceroy's secrets to the Congress because of his closeness to Patel, and because both men were Hindus. 'Though he is an old friend of mine, and one of the people I like best in Delhi, I am convinced that it is not possible to take him into confidence as fully as has been done in the past,' Abell warned his superior.[20] Acting on his advice, Mountbatten