Praise for the Book

'Manu S. Pillai has once again given us an enthralling look into a neglected realm of Indian history. *False Allies* is at once lucid and accessible, all the while maintaining deep scholarly rigor . . . With the erudition that we've come to expect from his books, Pillai navigates the world of colonial Indian kingship and puts on display the complex and diverse personalities of the princes . . . and their interactions with their subjects and their colonizers, demonstrating that the period and its actors were far from monolithic. The result is a refreshing work that reframes the Indian princely states as both harbingers of tradition and agents of change, and demands we give them their due for their role in shaping modernity. *False Allies* is certainly a masterpiece of historical writing.'

Caleb Simmons, author of *Devotional Sovereignty: Kingship and Religion in India* (2020)

'Manu S. Pillai has done the double. He's written a book that general readers will relish and scholars will respect. Using the life and paintings of Ravi Varma, India's most famous artist of his time, Pillai re-examines some of India's princely states and their rulers – its maharajas. Through admirable research, he discovers skilful modernizers and deft political operators, struggling to keep the British at a distance and "modernize" in ways acceptable to themselves and their subjects. This cleverly crafted book will delight general readers and lead scholars to re-think ideas about the India of the 19th and early 20th centuries.'

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'*False Allies* is a monumental achievement. Its sensitive portraits of India's princes rescue these long misunderstood figures from caricature and myth. By revealing how artfully India's princes addressed the challenges posed by colonialism and modernity, Manu S. Pillai makes them at once more human and more grand, and thereby grants them a more fitting

place in our collective imagination. Learned, erudite, and wide-ranging, *False Allies* is a landmark contribution to our understanding of modern India.'

Rahul Sagar, author of *The Dewan: Raja Sir Tanjore Madhava Rao and the Making of Modern India* (forthcoming) and editor of *The Progressive Maharaja: Sir Madhava Rao's Hints on the Art and Science of Government* (2021)

'Manu Pillai proves once again why he is one of India's most popular writers of historical nonfiction. Taking the work of master artist Raja Ravi Varma as inspiration, Pillai here paints his own luminous portrait of some of the colonial subcontinent's most significant and flamboyant royals. With scholarly command, a meticulous eye for detail, and a sense of the dramatic, he mingles light and shadow to add rich texture to the region's much maligned maharajahs, revealing complex characters who sometimes managed through perspicacity and perseverance to challenge the might of the British Empire and usher in new, progressive ideas of a modern nation.'

Manu Bhagavan, author of *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India* (2003)

'*False Allies* … provides a balanced account of the complex politics that defined the era before the rise of Congress and the emergence of a Pan-Indian nationalist movement … [It] offers a meandering and delightful journey through Princely India that is well-researched and supplied with copious endnotes and illustrations. Rich in anecdote and interesting asides, this is a wide-ranging and accessible introduction to an often-overlooked and misunderstood chapter of India's modern history.' ***Asian Review of Books***

'[Pillai's] scholarly gifts sit beside an ability to tease out juicy, hilarious, even bizarre nuggets from the nooks and crannies of historical sources. He buries the reader in mounds of notes and references, then regales

with a saucy sense of humour … expertly researched … [*False Allies*] will complicate the reader's understanding of India's struggle for independence because the story rarely includes the stories of the princely states.' ***Business Standard***

'Given the sheer number, as well as the enormous diversity of states … it is no easy task to pen an account that would be sufficiently comprehensive to give the reader a good idea about this diversity and, at the same time, rich in the kind of fascinating detail which makes for an absorbing narrative. Pillai performs this feat adroitly.' ***India Today***

'[*False Allies*] is a revelation … [Pillai] smashes the notion that the royalty of pre-independent India was only about exotic lifestyles, indulging in baubles of extravagance or wasting away in a haze of opioids. Instead, a complex nuanced world is revealed … [and Pillai] shows the readers how the princes, their queens and ministers deftly played the chess game set by the British Raj … *False Allies* is a must read …' ***The Hindu***

False Allies

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India's Maharajahs in the Age of Ravi Varma

Manu S. Pillai

juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published in hardback by Juggernaut Books 2021
Published in paperback by Juggernaut Books 2024

Front cover image: Composite portrait of forty maharajahs and rajahs of India, by an unknown artist, c. 1900. Image source: Granger.

Back cover image: Portrait of Maharana Fateh Singh (r. 1884–1930) of Udaipur painted by Raja Ravi Varma. Image source: Media Office, The City Palace, Udaipur © Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation.

Jacket design: Gavin Morris

This book was made possible through a grant from the
Sandeep and Gitanjali Maini Foundation.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353452162
E-ISBN: 9789391165925

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

For

T.M.P.
(1914–2006)

who couldn't read a word but made up for it with toughness and spirit

and

K.R.N.
(1931–2017)

who read widely and was the most decent person I knew

'Go ask the Maharajas how many wells they dug for the people in their States when they ruled them, how many roads they constructed, what they did to fight the slavery of the British. If you look at the account of their achievements before Independence, it is a big zero.'

Indira Gandhi, 1967

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Introduction

The World of India's Princes

In 1887 a young man of ample proportions climbed on to a tricycle to pose for a famous painter. On his face was a look of doleful seriousness, and in the background were rolling hills and wiry trees. His gaze was directed at the viewer, and the hint of a double chin betrayed both solemnity and the advent of fatal obesity. On its own, the scenery around could belong to any part of the world really, but the subject himself was clearly meant to flaunt a picture of the modern Indian, in step with the times and its impulses. He wore English trousers and shiny shoes, with a dreary dark coat and pocket watch. Indeed, besides ear studs and an embroidered cap, there was no concession at all to the Western stereotype of Eastern opulence here – the brown Victorian was swathed in bureaucratic blandness, not silk and colour; if he was exotic, it was only as much as the English queen in whose name starchy civil servants – in matching uniform – governed his country. In fact, the whole purpose of the portrait, it would seem, was not so much to capture the sixteen-year-old's likeness or flatter his features as to parade his assumed personality. That the effort was received poorly is another matter: in Simla, the summer capital of the British Raj, a critic savaged the subject's 'matriculation examination kind of expression' and the anxious effort to project 'a modern and progressive air'. Instead, he sniffed, the artist – the celebrated Raja Ravi Varma – ought to have preserved convention. After

Private collection of Uma Thampuran

Prince Asvathi Tirunal of Travancore on his tricycle.

all, our distinguished tricycle rider was an Indian prince, and 'flowing white robes' with a jewel or three would have served him far better than this 'European travesty'.[1]

The tricycle, in fact, is the most revealing element in the portrait of Prince Asvathi Tirunal of Travancore (1871–1900).[2] By itself the machine was not uncommon in fashionable society. First marketed for ageing men and delicate ladies, its novelty had swiftly attracted the attentions of the rich and famous. Queen Victoria, for example, was dazzled when she saw a girl move about in a 'flashing mass of spinning spokes' some years before – immediately a Salvo Quad tricycle was acquired for the empress of India, causing the instrument itself to be rebranded as the *Royal* Salvo. The Ottoman viceroy in Egypt followed suit, outshining the queen by having his order plated in silver. Meanwhile, a Tricyclists' Association in London demanded special privileges in the city's parks: tricycle enthusiasts, they argued, were patently superior to the bores and mortals who rode bicycles.[3] Of course, in the larger scheme of things, it was the bicycle that prevailed, but for our prince posing atop a Royal Salvo, the objective was clear: he wished to be noted as a member of the cosmopolitan global elite despite his darker shade of skin. While in Europe, even as he sat for Ravi Varma, the tricycle was slowly admitting defeat before its two-wheeled cousin, in India the same object signalled a claim to equality with the British, if not in a racial or political sense, at least in the realm of interests and intellect. The art critic did not appreciate it, and others too might have preferred more glitter and flash in depictions of 'native' royalty. But to sitter and artist both, the idea was not to portray the man as yet another tropical exhibit as much as a serious gentleman of Eastern make but Western polish.

One can see why the prince wished to show himself to the world in this hybrid fashion, for all around were still clichés about India's maharajahs. Only six years before, for example, a Raj veteran had published a devastating picture of local rulers. It was a caricature really but asserted with force the theme of the hopeless oriental despot. 'Monstrous and bloated in bulk, hideous and disgusting in appearance, decked with earrings and necklaces like a dancing girl, and tricked out in silks and

satins like a popinjay', the 'ghee-fed' Indian prince was little more than a 'hereditary scoundrel' to the censorious mind of this Englishman.[4] India itself, of course, was pretty, the writer conceded. 'Plenty appeared everywhere', 'gifts of Nature were scattered in rich profusion' and 'it was a place for the residence of Angels'. What was tragic, however, was that much of the land was in the hands of glorified dictators who, 'like a scorpion at the base of a beautiful lily', defaced it, violated it and frankly did not deserve it.[5] Indian princes were ignoble cretins who thought the world flat and parked on elephants and tortoises. They had little education and yet entertained outrageous pretensions to dignity. Power was to them a currency 'to gratify lusts', not 'a solemn trust' bestowed by providence.[6] Why, they were not even of decent blood, for 'from the Himalaya to Cape Komorin' sat on tinpot thrones the offspring of 'needy adventurers, lucky farmers, [and] successful freebooters'. Their states were physically the 'refuge of notorious criminals' and, morally, spaces 'where ideas stagnate'. It was unfortunate, the man suggested, that the British tolerated them at all.[7]

It was in this context that Ravi Varma depicted Asvathi Tirunal in that 1887 painting. It was not the first time the prince made an appearance in such a canvas, having as a boy posed with a brother. That frame presents Asvathi Tirunal with a book, its open page revealing the wonders of America, while his adolescent sibling rests his palm on a globe, tracing its location. Native princes supposedly knew little 'about countries and kingdoms beyond [their] narrow limits'.[8] And yet these royal sitters – here in Indian brocade – dispute such prejudice, laying claim to intelligence and knowledge.[9] Their principality too had made efforts to challenge the trope of native backwardness, earning respect for modernizing with a vengeance. Travancore's previous avatar as a case study in orthodox Hindu kingship was muted to accommodate a blended system in which engineering works were launched, schools were established, officials issued wordy reports in English about 'progress' and the ruler ceded many traditional prerogatives now past their expiry date. A year after Asvathi Tirunal posed on his tricycle, Travancore also became home to one of the first legislatures in the subcontinent. Admittedly, it

was not a total transformation, and modernization was perennially at odds with the old ways: one ruler complained that the place remained 'the most priest-ridden Native State in the whole of India', expending fortunes on antiquated Brahminical ceremonies.[10] So even as Travancore earned praise for Western-style government, the *Times of India* named it 'the home of ultra-montane Brahminism', unusually 'intolerant' to social change.[11]

Our tricycle rider, however, was decidedly on the 'progressive' side of things. Where in upper India colonial authorities struggled to persuade rajahs to instruct their sons in British-approved methods of administration and thinking, this scion of Travancore keenly embraced English education. Where a forebear, when establishing a college, privately declared it the foundation stone for anti-royal anarchy,[12] Asvathi Tirunal after matriculating pursued a university degree with gusto. Even as his uncle prepared for a ritual that saw him weighed against a heap of gold, distributed promptly to 15,000 Brahmins,[13] the nephew obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree, acquiring the moniker 'B.A. Prince'. In 1892, when that charismatic advocate of reformed Hinduism, Vivekananda, visited Travancore, not only did Asvathi Tirunal 'interrogate' him about his travels and contacts with Indian progressives, he also whipped out a camera, flaunting a stylish new passion; impressed, the swami certified him as holding 'plenty of promise'.[14] Two years later, on a pan-Indian study tour, among the experiences he collected was that of viewing proceedings in a Bombay courtroom.[15] Even the viceroy Lord Curzon, notoriously hostile to Indian royalty, thought this specimen a 'man of culture, of travel, and of learning', who had earned his stripes by becoming the first graduate 'among all the Indian Princes'.[16] If there was that enduring notion of native rulers as 'grossly ignorant, grovelingly superstitious . . . without manners or power of conversation, without ideas or facility of speech', and 'selfish, cruel, fickle, and cowardly',[17] Asvathi Tirunal lived to challenge it.

Unfortunately, despite ticking boxes to match colonial standards, the man forgot to tick certain other essential areas. By 1899 he was 'far too stout, quite unwieldy, and [had] given up all exercise', with the result

that bad health intruded on his plans and brought death to his door the following summer.[18] He never became maharajah, had no children and his widow lapsed into obscurity, so that soon the prince faded from memory, leaving his promise unfulfilled. His Ravi Varma portrait did survive in his wife's house, however, commemorating the idealized vision he held of himself: young, progressive, rebutting those who saw Indian princes as human parasites. Critics wished the maharajahs to admit 'their moral inferiority', that 'time and men have changed, that it is their misfortune to be anachronisms, [and] that their antediluvian ideas and wishes cannot be tolerated'.[19] Men like Asvathi Tirunal went out of their way to take the sting out of such denunciations, joining their culture with the drift of the modern age. But what the prince did not realize – and what his peers would discover the hard way – was that, for all their pontifications on progress in India, the British were insincere masters. What they *really* sought was an arbitrary balance between exoticism and modernity, between princely splendour and administrative sobriety. As Sunil Khilnani notes, maharajahs were 'required to be at once conservative and liberal . . . to sport turbans and read Bagehot'.[20] But they could never ascend to equality with their imperial wardens – they would forever be *almost* modern, never fully so. For if the second possibility were admitted, how would the Raj sustain the myth that white men governed India for its own good?

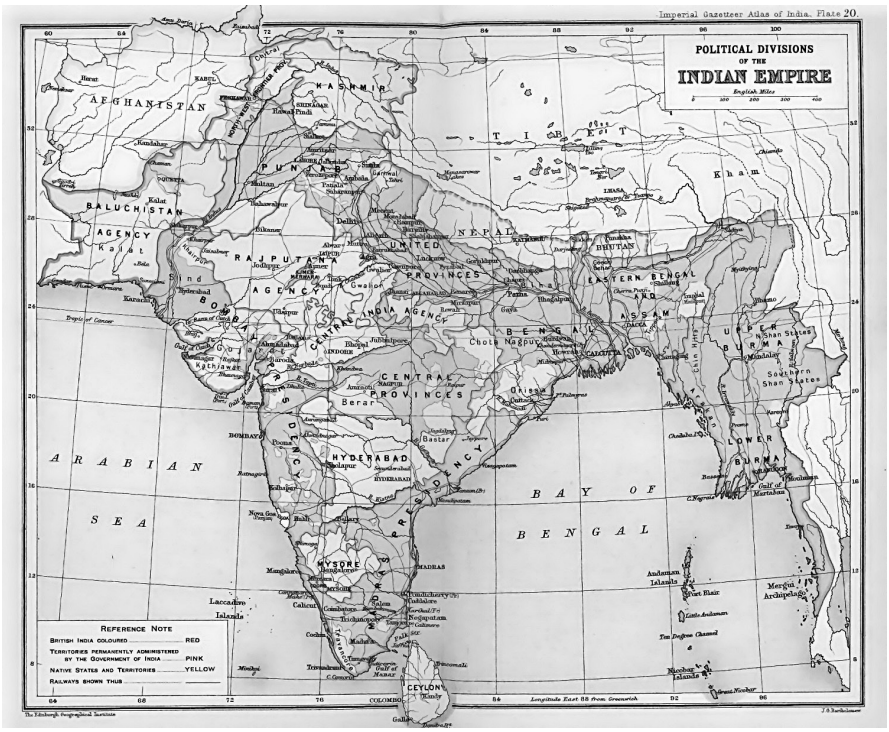
The world Ravi Varma depicted in his canvases is one poorly understood today. Indian princes and their states, when evoked now, are the stuff of overstated romance or sneering disdain, if not a compound of both. With palaces and processions, elephants and servitors, not to speak of proverbial riches, Indian royalty recall that trite line by Rudyard Kipling: 'Providence created the maharajahs to offer mankind a spectacle.' Entertainment they were certainly capable of providing – writing in 1931 a critic noted how an official princely conclave also gave de facto competition to the New York Automobile Show. If one

maharajah flaunted a car with trendy security features, another showed up with searchlights installed, of the kind that sat on warships. If some royal vehicles were gold plated, others aimed for economy, if not variety in taste, with silver.[21] Even personal eccentricities made the maharajahs founts for transregional gossip. One thought himself an incarnation of Vishnu, while another believed he was Louis XIV of France reborn among Punjabis. The last nizam of Hyderabad owned truckloads of gems but was also a miser who salvaged smokes from stubbed-out cigarettes. Meanwhile, a ruler in the north-west had an appetite for sex, apocryphal tales telling how, if the nizam was styled 'His Exalted Highness', this fickle grandee was parodied as 'His *Exhausted* Highness'.[22] Why, in the 1880s, an Indian prince was even accused of harbouring a romantic predisposition for elephants.[23] Unsurprisingly, then, the maharajahs were typically cast as ludicrous idiots, who served no cause but their own, and whose avarice and infirmity meant they played no role in the making of modern India – precisely the kind of charge an Asvathi Tirunal might resent.

But as with stereotypes generally, while there was a measure of truth to this talk of excess, its circulation also served more insidious purposes. For the British, it conveniently infantilized Indian rulers and cemented the claim that natives were simply incapable of serious government. India's traditional leaders were no good, except for frivolous sex and fancy dress, thus justifying stern, manly imperial supervision. Similarly, for a younger crop of nationalists, animated by democratic ideals, silken autocracy was a relic of feudal yesterdays; India's destiny, recovered after a long struggle, could not brook men who played no part in the battles that mattered. The princes were British proxies, who cast their lot with the wrong side of history, deserving little sympathy. Particularly in the closing stages of the freedom struggle, they had tended towards repression – or as Jawaharlal Nehru put it in the 1930s, 'Indian rulers and their ministers have spoken and acted increasingly in the approved fascist manner.' His feud was not personal: the fight, he clarified, was 'against autocracy and oppression itself'. Yes, there were princes who 'may be good people', but in exercising power they had generally proved 'inhuman'.[24] It did not help, as far as the

Indian National Congress was concerned, that the Hindu Mahasabha, championing a majoritarian vision of the nation, found welcome in the states. In the 1940s, thus, when Nehru spoke of republics and democracy, the Mahasabha was urging fidelity to the maharajahs as 'embodiments of Hindu pride'. Their ancestors had apparently saved India from Muslim domination, making them agreeable mascots for political Hinduism.[25] And what the Mahasabha endorsed, segments of the Congress leadership instinctively abhorred.[26]

As with most things pertaining to the past, however, the story of the princely states is also vastly more complex than simplistic readings suggest. And if the states are viewed on their own terms, they present a rather unexpected picture. To begin with, there was their sheer physical reach, for together the maharajahs controlled two-fifths of subcontinental territory, and about a quarter of its population.[27] Most



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Map showing princely and British Indian territories.

discussions of 'Indian history', however, restrict themselves to *British*-ruled India, excluding this large slice of *Indian*-ruled India.[28] It is an approach that eclipses the experience of imperialism for millions who resided in the states, and *their* political evolution. Public mobilization here, for example, occurred not within nationalistic bounds of Indians versus the Raj, but along caste and religious lines – a detail which nuances general comprehension of that period.[29] In economic terms too, though the states included India's more industrially and educationally forward provinces like Mysore and Cochin, they attract scant notice: as Barbara Ramusack observes, 'In over a thousand pages of text, the second volume of *The Cambridge Economic History of India, c. 1757–c. 1970* has less than twenty references to the princely states.'[30] Even conceptually, the princely states are handicapped, described as being subject to 'indirect rule', that is, a system where token princes preserved a facade while the strings were pulled by white puppeteers.[31] The fact, however, is that the Raj's equation with the princes was one of constant negotiation and unending suspicion. The British were the stronger party, but the maharajahs had leverage too. And as their overlords made every attempt to dominate them, they also proved more than able to manipulate the system and resist colonial penetration – including sometimes by means of visual art and sitting on tricycles.

What the states deserve, then, is a more sophisticated approach and a more prominent place in general imagination. Even allowing the charge that they were nothing more than 'pillars of the empire', as is often alleged, the fact is that each pillar was of different design, and each had a unique story. Every major princely realm presents a historically dissimilar experience, and in any larger understanding of India, their incorporation is not just helpful but indispensable. The Maratha rulers of Gwalior, for instance, whose ancestors conquered territories dominated by others till the mid-eighteenth century, faced different challenges as compared to Rajput royalty, whose princely legitimacy went back a dozen generations; how political, economic and social dynamics evolved around these courts naturally varied. Some principalities were allies of the East India Company prior to being subordinated, while others began

as inferiors in the first place, to the extent of being British creations – their cases too are unidentical. Thus, for every state they were able to pompously berate, as late as 1903 colonial officials were complaining of the nizam being 'too much on an equality' with the Raj, his state anything but a sham.[32] Similarly, where some kingdoms were divested of military muscle early in the day, counterparts elsewhere kept formidable armies till late in the nineteenth century. And as shall be seen, there is a surplus of evidence that these 'pillars' were often less than sturdy, needing constant surveillance to hold them in place. The maharajahs had their own calculations, and the Raj had to perpetually stay on its guard to ensure these did not threaten colonial goals and upset a delicate balance. To view Indian-ruled India as a circus of the absurd on the margins of British India, then, hardly furthers the cause of unravelling such complexities, and the country's many-layered colonial experience.

In terms of political structure too, the states offered variety. The larger the territory controlled by a 'native chief', greater were the factors at play, and more intricate its internal politics. Of 562 states, nearly 60 per cent were spread over a total of about 6,500 square miles of territory in western and central India, making them microscopic estates rather than kingdoms. On the other hand, 108 principalities with tens of millions of subjects covered well over 5,00,000 square miles, Kashmir alone holding 17 per cent of this figure.[33] Historical contingencies and accidents led to misleading classifications, betraying the ad-hoc manner in which British policy evolved, further muddying comprehension of the princes. Pudukkottai, for example, possessed 1,200 square miles of real estate and was classed with the states; Ramnad, once Pudukkottai's superior, held 2,000 square miles but sat with zamindars. Hyderabad, meanwhile, second to Kashmir in size, but inflated in prestige, had a complex 'multiethnic and multitiered political system' within its bounds.[34] Its Muslim nizams had arrived here as Mughal representatives in the eighteenth century, but local Hindu powers who paid them homage had been around for ages – just as the British managed a so-called system of 'indirect rule' with the maharajahs, many maharajahs in turn had similar internal arrangements with lower levels of indigenous authority.

In Hyderabad, some of these autonomous vassals traced their lines to the Kakatiya period, showing a fascinating historical continuity across many centuries. In Jaipur (Dhundar) it would take till the 1930s for its government to 'claim the minimal fiscal and legal powers characteristic of a modern state' from local chieftains, and even in 1938 a subordinate was able to attempt armed rebellion.[35] All this was alien, meanwhile, to bureaucratized Travancore – when conflict arose in this southern territory, it was not courtesy of recalcitrant feudatories but thanks to communists winning over the working classes.

In what may be awkward to register today, in terms of identity too, the states mattered, just as India's present-day federal units have distinct personalities. Baroda's Maratha rulers, for instance, ruled over a mass of Gujarati subjects. Though unwelcome invaders at first, the royal family came to terms with their people and created a stake for them in the court's survival. As a result, 'attempts to organize political protests on lines similar to those in British India were never a great success' in the state.[36] So much so that when the Raj was terminated, 'there was little enthusiasm in Baroda over [its] integration . . . into the new independent India'. Far from suffusing the land with nationalist delight, 'there was a feeling of depression and sorrow' here.[37] So too in Rampur, a sentiment of *Rampuriyat* (that is, a sense of belonging) was intense and its people felt an emotional bond of love and nostalgia for the state, manifested in cultural and literary forms.[38] Even with Pudukkottai, small though it was, the archive shows that the idea of physical integration with India elicited dismay. Officials under Sardar Patel – the 'Iron Man' who united princely units with British India – observed that the 'majority' of the rajah's subjects were not on board with merging the state with the ex-colonial districts around them.[39] The local legislature – and many states had legislative councils – went so far as to demand a plebiscite, insisting that Pudukkottai continue as Pudukkottai in independent India, because that identity and its physical bounds meant something.[40] The ruling family here, ironically, had not been terribly popular and could claim its fair share of scandal and ignominy; yet, evidently, their subjects identified with the principality. It is this emotional connection

that makes descendants of former royal houses even today appealing candidates in democratic elections, giving namesake maharajahs conspicuous stature despite the loss of their ancestral powers.[41]

To simply dismiss the princely states as unworthy of historical interrogation, then – as a world of dancing girls and empty-headed despots – blurs intelligent perception. The cartoon idea that dominates nationalist retellings presents maharajahs as British clients, lost in sexual escapades while leeching off a weeping peasantry. It did not help that colonial narratives encouraged such disdain to sustain imperial interests: one nineteenth-century writer called the princes British 'tenants', erasing their character as well as histories.[42] They were presented by the Raj through a prism of expedience, as blingy tools for outsourced administrative labour. Lord Canning, the British Crown's first viceroy, for instance, labelled the states 'royal instruments' for the empire's security.[43] A successor, Lord Lytton, described the princes as not only a counter to 'Baboos' writing 'semi-seditious articles in the Native Press' and emerging as the first generation of Indian nationalists, but also as a means to 'strengthen very materially' British authority.[44] While they were not incorrect, there was more to the states than partisan packaging. For the maharajahs also transformed the Raj, and in negotiations with the princes, imperial authorities revealed their own vulnerabilities. One Victorian functionary asserted a little too loudly, thus, that the 'supremacy of the British Government is not derived … from any power inherited from the Moguls'. British paramountcy emerged, instead, 'partly by conquest; partly by Treaty; partly by usage'.[45] And yet flashy durbars orchestrated by successive viceroys were patently about reclaiming Mughal rituals to fortify British standing. After all the colonial enterprise in India had originated with merchants literally kissing Mughal feet.[46] Lining up maharajahs now in processions, bestowing titles and insisting on public fealty were exercises not just in projecting might, but also in seeking a legitimacy the Raj feared it did not possess.[47]

This was, in fact, admitted by Lytton, who observed to his London bosses that simply building roads and irrigation works, or putting up 'good government' was not adequate to win local support for the

Raj; Indian imagination was welded to the interests of its princes and hereditary leaders. 'They are a powerful aristocracy,' the viceroy recorded, and his conundrum was that 'whilst, on the one hand, we require their cordial and willing allegiance, we certainly cannot afford to give them any increased political power independent of our own'.[48] A racist slur Curzon unleashed on the Persians could have applied to India also, when he declared that 'the normal Asiatic would sooner be misgoverned by Asiatics than well governed by Europeans'.[49] History had already taught the authorities this much. While the Great Rebellion of 1857 had many sparks, ranging from agrarian discontent to religious provocation, a leading factor was also the toppling of esteemed royal houses. This too was the reason why leadership of the revolt was readily bestowed upon the princes who joined, just as its failure was linked to the refusal of a sizeable number to engage. Benjamin Disraeli correctly cautioned his colleagues in the House of Commons that the rebellion was no small mutiny. 'There must be no more annexation, no more conquest,' because India could not be governed 'by merely European agency'.[50] Nearly twenty years later, it was Disraeli who, as prime minister, helped Victoria fill Mughal shoes and proclaim herself India's empress, forging ritual bonds with the princes. The British possessed hard power in guns and were willing to use it too, but for stability in the subcontinent, they had to win over the maharajahs. That the latter knew this perfectly well rendered the imperial edifice itself susceptible to tremors.

Indeed, to merely view the maharajahs as stooges of the Raj would be an inadequate reading.[51] For while they were weak in physical strength, their cultural stature was not inconsiderable. As one scholar put it, people 'conceived of politics [itself] in terms of rajas and ranis, padishahs and begums',[52] which allowed Indian royalty to subtly remind the British of their foreignness. The princely alliance with the Raj was always a constantly readjusting transaction. In 1877, for example, the ruler of Indore spouted grovelling lines of loyalty. 'India has been till now a vast heap of stones,' the maharajah fawned, 'some of them big, some of them small.' It was thanks to the British that '[n]ow the house is built, and from roof to basement each stone of it is in the right place'.[53] On the

face of it, this was as pro-Raj as princes could get. And yet, the same man was condemned by officials as 'a Chief whose disloyalty' was 'notorious' and who by 'intriguing in every possible manner' presented the Raj with 'persistent opposition'. The issue was simple: Indore was willing to flatter the British so long as they did not interfere in his domain; 'treaty rights', he explained, 'should always receive the most careful consideration', which was his way of telling the viceroy to mind his business.[54] Nothing vexed the Raj more than maharajahs deploying Western legalisms like this. So much so that as late as 1926, a viceroy had to assert that British supremacy 'exists quite independently' of treaties, and that 'no Ruler of an Indian State can justifiably claim to negotiate with the British Government on an equal footing'.[55] What is instructive here is not the statement itself, but the fact that only two decades before the final British withdrawal from India, supposedly servile princes needed such rebukes at all. Their language could border on oily, but friction was the founding principle of the maharajahs' dance with the Raj – including in such seemingly minor matters as ritual and vocabulary.

Much, in fact, has been made of the princely propensity for hollow pomp. As an administrator explained, 'loss of much of their real power makes [the maharajahs] more anxious to preserve forms that yet remain of royalty' through overblown pageantry. If the British suspended ritual intercourse, he felt, it would 'mortify them'.[56] In this view, ritualism was a sop for Indians divested of meaningful authority – a consolation prize, given that they had forfeited the trophy. In fact, however, the imperial power was just as keen to play this game. As early as the eighteenth century, their representatives in local courts clamoured for funds to keep up appearances; or as the Company's Hyderabad man conveyed, the nizam had so many people entitled to ceremonial distinctions about him, that 'for the sake of some appearance of equality', it was essential he match up.[57] Without ritual, the Company's agents were small fry and could be treated as such. The tables could be reversed too: helping a prince of Indore win the throne in 1843, Lord Ellenborough got him to present 101 coins to his envoy – with that quiet act, the ruler did the British homage, admitting inferiority.[58] By leading princes to their seats,

determining how close the imperial agent's chair was kept and through other nitty-gritties, the Raj too conducted politics through ritual.[59] This, in fact, was also seen as a means to transfer 'recollections of the [Mughals'] imperial authority' to the British, yearning as they were to fit into an Indian cultural language, and to make 'princes and chiefs' cooperate 'cordially'.[60] Which then begs the question that if the maharajahs were slovenly heads of bogus states, why go to such prodigious lengths to court them in their own idiom?

On the Indian side, meanwhile, as British power swelled, ritual offered a platform for princes to taunt their suzerains even when official language was sugary. In 1861 the nizam was created a member of the Order of the Star of India. While intended as an honour, it also meant acknowledging the queen's supremacy, causing the man to avoid his investiture for as long as possible. When it could no longer be delayed, he refused to place the insignia around his neck, declaring it akin to a slave's collar. As for wearing a medal featuring Victoria's face, there was no chance at all. So at the ceremony, he 'simply grabbed it from [the British representative's] hand, deposited it on the *masnad* [throne], and sat on it'.[61] It was not resistance by street protest or armed force, but within princely settings and its powerful world of symbols, it was still a denial of legitimacy. Even trickery was not unprecedented. In 1877, another nizam went to Delhi, where his minister attempted to convey that Hyderabad was 'equal in sovereignty' to the Raj even if 'unequal in strength'. When the viceroy asked for the nizam's 'loyalty' and 'allegiance', the minister coolly rendered the chief words as 'friendship' and 'alliance'. 'My interpreter having noticed this, I corrected the intentional mistranslation,' the viceroy hissed, 'and caused the young Nizam to be informed that I meant . . . obedience and fidelity.'[62] Meanwhile, in 1871, Raj officials were aghast to find that Gwalior was still minting coins in the name of a Mughal emperor.[63] Resistance appears also in native ministers' regular use of the term 'royal family' for Indian princely lines, which the British saw as a violation – to them these were *ruling* families, for Victoria alone was 'royal'.[64] These negotiations on wording and ritual, moreover, were not bursts of pique; as one scholar put it, 'a slavishly subservient prince would

have undercut his own legitimacy', making defiance, one way or another, and in whatever degree affordable, imperative to his political dignity.[65]

Subversion, in fact, was an inbuilt feature of the princely relationship with the British, though the extent to which it could be attempted depended on many factors, including the nature of their representative (generally called the Resident or Political Agent), the attitude of the higher authorities and the personality and pluck of each ruler. Indian princes often ventured, for example, to cloister British officers in their capitals, preventing free intercourse with their court and refusing audiences. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Hyderabad Resident, for instance, complained that he was 'purposely kept' in isolation from local 'men of rank and eminence'.[66] Decades later, in 1922, a successor gloomily repeated how he 'had not even been allowed a confidential conversation of five minutes' with the nizam.[67] Such unfriendliness was strategic, for why risk transmitting unnecessary intelligence to the British, who in their paranoia also ran an elaborate machine for hoovering gossip?[68] This did not mean maharajahs did not employ similar techniques: rulers in Lucknow, Jaipur and Hyderabad seduced Residents, giving bribes, employing their illegitimate offspring and even greasing the palms of Indian aides.[69] In Indore, a Resident was scandalized on being presented gold coins concealed in a fruit basket – when admonished, the sender apologetically asked whether he had expected a higher figure.[70] If a Resident remained nosey, other responses were invented. As Michael Fisher tells, excuses ranging from prayers to the 'operation of depilation' (that is, hair removal) were put forth to 'postpone unwanted discussions with British political agents, thus gaining these Rulers valuable time and sometimes negotiating advantage'.[71] In 1841 when told that approval was mandatory for ministerial appointees, one maharajah promptly declared his intention to rule sans minister.[72] Fudging accounts was another favourite technique: as late as 1906 the British were ruing 'scanty information' about Jaipur's finances, for example.[73] And when its head made donations to official charities, they recognized it as a clever tactic to 'ride the Government of India off from paying inconvenient attention' to his books of account.[74]

Such victories mattered, and if their armies were toothless, princes compensated through personal shrewdness. One Resident, for example, was astounded when he witnessed a ruler, who was sent disagreeable news, use boisterous ceremonial to spin this as the exact opposite. The nawab gave out robes of honour and ordered 'public rejoicings' till it appeared as though the 'fullest extent' of his wishes was permitted, not declined by the British.[75] Given how ritual was amenable to manipulation, this too, then, had to be policed by weary officials. They blocked, thus, the bestowal of ceremonial honours by the peshwa in Poona on Maratha chiefs after 1802, because they understood it gave the peshwa a risky aura of superiority. For the privilege of keeping shoes on in court, Residents waged battles for decades – in Hyderabad, the demand was resisted for two generations till the British finally succeeded in the reign of a three-year-old without an opinion.[76] So also they looked 'minutely on every point' in the exchange of gifts, because gifts held powerful meanings.[77] Lord Hastings avoided Delhi on a tour, for example, because convention required him to appear before the Mughal emperor and receive presents – a mark of servitude.[78] With the replacement of the emperor by an empress, however, the Raj insisted on Indians paying *her* ritual dues – Navaratri festivities in Ramnad in 1892, thus, featured Hindu rites, with the innovation that opposite the throne sat a portrait of the queen.[79] Interestingly, so much for the maharajahs being ciphers, it was really the empress who was in that position.[80] The princes, while troubled by interference, still taxed their people, presided over judicial matters and framed laws – powers denied to Victoria.[81] Their sovereignty was *divided*, in that foreign policy and similar subjects were surrendered, but the remainder stayed within their grasp, unlike the queen whose role was entirely titular.[82] So, when Curzon described princes as living in 'bejewelled and frivolous idleness', the critique applied less to its targets and more to his mighty empress.[83]

Over time, in fact, despite constant needling, the princes were able to extract even harder forms of power from their suzerains. Military matters are a case in point. As Britain's geopolitical contest with Russia ('The Great Game') gained pace in the closing decades of the nineteenth

century, the maharajahs' armies – totalling 3,14,000 troops – suddenly looked appealing.[84] Till 1879 the policy was to limit their access to technology and weaponry, so as to reduce princely forces to a derelict gaggle rather than a meaningful threat to the Raj. And yet, in the end, ever-growing reliance was vested in them. Princely troops served in Afghanistan and Africa, and during the Boxer Rebellion in China, the maharajahs of Bikaner, Gwalior and Idar were personally present with their contingents.[85] In the First World War, 15 per cent of Punjabi enlistees in the British-Indian army came from the states.[86] Rajput principalities contributed as many as 48,611 combatants,[87] while Patiala alone provided 26,648 fighters.[88] The Bikaner maharajah was the only Indian signatory to the Treaty of Versailles alongside the United States president and other global powers. It may be tempting to view the princes as being 'used' here, but the fact is that the states also made gains. Not only did they wrest greater internal autonomy, they also boldly began to demand a share of power in *British* India – that is, in the running of the empire itself. The princes were also starting to lobby together, sending a shiver down colonial spines. As an official warned, 'The Native States, taken singly, cannot give us serious trouble, but by encouraging them to form themselves into a sort of trade union, we are calling into existence a formidable power which will most certainly be used to bring pressure to bear.'[89] That in 1917 the princes were still described as 'formidable' is revealing of the resources yet at their command.

The fact is that by the dawn of the twentieth century, sounds from the states were aggravating the Raj as much as nationalist clamour under the Congress. And the British had no option but to respond to this pressure – if Curzon acted like an overbearing nanny, his successor Minto changed course and conciliated. On the princely side there was logic to this growing ambition: as a ruler stated, 'We do not wish to become mere puppets and share the fate of some of the European aristocracies.'[90] Before the Imperial War Conference, the Bikaner maharajah also expressed hopes that Britain would not forget the 'just claims and aspirations of India' after the war – a lot like Mahatma Gandhi expected concessions in the post-war period as a reward for

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Maharajah Ganga Singh of Bikaner (standing, in turban) featured in William Orpen's The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors *(1919).*

nationalist cooperation.[91] Indeed, Bikaner even asked for a categorical declaration that 'self-government within the British Empire is the object and goal of British rule'.[92] Providing unsolicited advice on 'liberal political reforms' in *British* India, he spoke of greater power for native legislators, and the creation of a princely council to consult with the government.[93] Ominously, he envisioned native royalty working in a 'complementary' fashion with the 'democratic element in British India'.[94] Naturally, the establishment was nervous – while they were cultivating princes as a *counter* to the Congress, here was free talk of cooperation. The man, then, was informed that 'just as the states resented any interference by the Government of India in their internal affairs, so the states must reciprocate by refraining from any interference in the affairs of British India'.[95] The last thing they wanted was 'intrigues between the Chiefs and the political leaders of British India', that is, pesky Congressmen.[96] While princes might be used *against* nationalists, a coalition of the two was dangerous; no room could be allowed for Indian prestige to unite with the nationalism of a pestilent Congress.[97]

Despite this discomfort about involving princes in British-Indian matters, however, there were moments when the Raj had to condone exactly that. In the mid-1910s, for example, when the government wished to construct irrigation works on the sacred river Ganga, they encountered opposition from Madan Mohan Malaviya, a Congressman and staunch Hindu. It took princely mediation to find a compromise, with the Raj carting to the negotiating table Maratha, Rajput, Sikh and Brahmin royalty to persuade the politician to give way.[98] Such cultural value could also be requisitioned in international matters. So, when the Ottoman empire entered the First World War, the British requested Hyderabad's nizam – the last great symbol of Mughal glory – to ask Indian Muslims to remain loyal to them, as opposed to the Ottoman king, who was also the caliph of Islam. This particular nizam, incidentally, was someone officials comprehensively disliked – by the 1940s some would openly pray for the day when 'His Exalted Highness may oblige us by joining his predecessors' in the afterlife.[99] For the time being, though, his support was urgently needed. To be clear, the nizam

was not permitting himself to be exploited: he had his own interests, which when they were not met, saw him roll back assistance – a few years later, the same man was funding a conference on the *restoration* of the Caliphate, bringing disquiet to the viceroy.[100] In time he also got his heir married to the daughter of the last caliph, burnishing his credentials in the Islamic world. He was a notoriously bad ruler and sitting on a tinderbox of religious polarization. And yet the British dared not depose him – the nizam was too important, a viceroy qualifying the man as 'the spokesman and leader of Mahomedans in India'.[101]

In the end, then, the downfall of the princes was not due to the British but their own hesitation to move with the times. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Raj was forced to respond to nationalist aspirations, but few maharajahs understood that they too would need to shift gears. If in the nineteenth century the idea of India as a nation was a novelty, into the twentieth, it fast became an emotional reality; to row against its currents was to write one's obituary. Even if only to protect their interests, the rulers failed at coordination. The viceroy in the 1920s had permitted the creation of a Chamber of Princes, but the body was handicapped: Rajput rajahs sneered at Maratha royalty, while senior rulers like the nizam were aghast at sitting on an equality with princelings of either kind. As Lord Irwin reported, the maharajahs were 'undoubtedly hampered' by a 'temperamental incapacity to agree among themselves'.[102] In some ways, they were still in an India that was a loose patchwork of entities rather than a nation, a point that also blinded princes to the appeal of democracy. So, in the inter-war period, when viceroys increasingly desisted from interference, Indian royalty utilized this room for manoeuvre not to reinvent themselves, but to resurrect paternalist rule.[103] When at last conceded more autonomy than ever, most maharajahs lapsed into anachronistic tendencies. The British knew why: 'The princes,' it was recorded in 1926, 'are afraid of the future . . . They are the last congenital autocrats in the world. Democracy has swept away others before their eyes . . . and they are terrified lest out of deference to clamour or fetish of the people's will we should let all the powers of the Government of India pass to a responsible Government'

run by Congressmen.[104] Arguably, a savvy maharajah would have forged links with the Congress, but most shut doors and stifled dissent instead – an attitude that left a sour taste in nationalist mouths, and has since tarnished the princely legacy.

Looking back from the present, though, where the states are meticulously ignored in narratives of the period, it is in fact startling how even in the 1930s the maharajahs possessed opportunities to carve out a future in post-colonial India. They were invited to the Round Table Conferences, and while Congressmen like Nehru were cold, Gandhi himself was more circumspect, leaving the door ajar for engagement. In a sense, the mahatma, whose religiosity influenced his politics and who manifested a distinct conservatism, respected the cultural weight of the princes; he was, besides, born a princely subject, in a family with a history of royal service. He also admired many rulers personally: the Travancore maharani was an 'object of my envy' for her 'severe simplicity',[105] while Mysore's maharajah was a 'Rajarshi' – a royal sage – whose realm came close to Gandhi's utopian Ramrajya.[106] Other Congressmen too saw value in the rulers, and in this period imperial 'officials and Indian nationalists [both] pursued princely allies', revealing their importance.[107] Pressed into taking steps for Indian self-government, the British proposed a federal structure, with elected provincial governments as well as a national centre with a place for the states. In what would prove to be their undoing, however, the maharajahs failed to rise to the occasion – while some welcomed new equations, the majority were lost in myopia. They prevaricated on a settlement so that by the late 1930s, as Congress was forming ministries in British provinces and marching in from the street to govern, the princes were consumed by perilous trivialities. An official had succinctly captured the consequences of this attitude well in advance: 'British India is advancing along the lines of Evolution,' he declared, while 'the Indian States are on the road to Revolution.'[108]

And revolution it was. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the federation option was discarded. Congressmen resigned from government and were again on the streets and then in jail. While the states made remarkable contributions – financially and in military terms –

to the war on fascism, when it ended, they found they were no longer real partners at the negotiating table. Circumstances had altered, and there was little sympathy for princely grievances, which looked vulgar against such looming catastrophes as Partition. As an officer in the know reminisced, before the war the only way to realize a federation 'would have been to take the princes by the neck and compel them'.[109] At that time it was not an option because of the rulers' still-potent position. In the late 1940s, however, with the world itself transformed, the maharajahs were presented a fait accompli: they would hereafter be *tolerated*, not entertained, as equals. It also did not help that many experienced princes – including the Bikaner maharajah who spoke of cooperating with democratic forces – were dead. With the Raj set to terminate, and surprisingly swiftly, the fate of the maharajahs came to rest with the Congress. Where in the 1930s they had still had room to delay, now Sardar Patel towered over them with a dotted line on which to sign, wielding carrot and stick both. Most submitted quietly in a pall of gloom. With Hyderabad, however, the Indian government did not hesitate to launch a full-scale invasion, which included aerial bombing. Though played down through a more sedate term, the seriousness of the affair comes through in the suppression of an official report, which estimated that twenty-seven to forty thousand people were killed 'during and after' the so-called 'police action'.[110] When the British left, then, the face-off between the Congress and the maharajahs featured blood and violence – their states had become, in Patel's words, poisonous 'ulcers' to be excised for the viability of a hard-won nation.[111]

It was a strange gravestone for royal India, given its larger history. But the even greater irony is that the Congress and princes had originally been friends.

One of the prime witnesses to this ultimately doomed world of the maharajahs was Ravi Varma the artist. Though established in India's collective imagination for his mythological paintings, the man was also a

public figure whose career straddled princely India as well as those urban pockets that were home to the early nationalists. His lucrative portrait-making enterprise saw him wield the brush in service of the most iconic princes of the age as well as that first generation of Congressmen. In a career spanning over four decades, he produced paintings of everyone from Edward VII to some of the most trenchant critics of the same monarch's imperium.[112] Indeed, through his art Ravi Varma captured a political universe itself, telling stories of the individuals who typified the age. He certainly knew that his work might one day serve purposes other than of artistic inquiry, writing: 'The historical importance of pictures is difficult to over-estimate. They throw as much light on the men and manners of a period as any amount of written record[s].'[113] By depicting princes and intellectuals, statesmen and politicians, and traversing the length and breadth of India to build his reputation, Ravi Varma created a visual archive through which may be plotted the story of a little-discussed political space. And his own experiences represent the contradictory forces at play: as much as he was admired by powerful Englishmen, in everyday encounters he was subject to quotidian racism. By the end of his life, as nationalism awakened his homeland, he not only participated in a Congress session, but also contributed to the process in his own distinct way.[114] And while he has been called the 'Painter of Colonial India', it is really a specific *chapter* we find represented in Ravi Varma's art, where nationalists and princes were still on the same page, and a future without the maharajahs was yet to be imagined.[115] It is this phase that is the subject of this book.

Writing in 1928, in fact, one of Curzon's former aides recalled how even in the early twentieth century it was entirely in order for politically conscious Indians in British territory to be in awe of their royal countrymen. 'I often watched', the man recalled, as maharajahs 'visited British India, and the profound respect and reverence' they commanded among 'the leading citizens of the various capitals'. Many of these progressives were anglicized lawyers, 'free and easy' in English society. Yet, 'in the presence of a real Raja' their 'manner and attitude changed', and they became surprisingly 'humble and deferential'. It was as if they

Travancore royal collection

Raja Ravi Varma in 1904 after he was awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind medal.

'instinctively recognised their natural leaders and were glad and proud to see them'.[116] The official need not have been surprised, because he had already answered why the princes inspired veneration. Turning Curzon in his grave, his ex-secretary wrote: 'I regard the average Indian State as better suited to the happiness and temperament of the Indian than the huge unwieldy' British system. The native principality was more able to 'bring content and opportunities to the people' than the imperial bureaucracy, because it possessed a personal touch and had an ear to the ground.[117] Even if a bit too rosy, this was not an outlandish proposition: in 1910, a more senior figure had also blasphemed when he said, 'We have much to learn from Native States.' Yes, many presented 'a loose despotic system' but given their strong local roots, these governments did not 'press hard on the daily lives of the people'. On the other hand, the British machinery, though 'scientific', was rigid and not particularly better given the procedural harassment it inflicted.[118] Yet another colonial officer observed that where the princes were one up on the Raj was in their 'claim on the general regard of the people'. The idea of a maharajah, he believed, 'strikes [the Indian] imagination' in a way impossible for the file-bearing civil servant.[119]

Among those so struck, curiously enough, were founders of the Congress. To some extent their love was born of economics, for assorted maharajahs donated generously to the organization in its infancy. This included rulers such as of Baroda and Travancore as well as zamindars from Ramnad and Bobbili. Princely largesse, in fact, was showered so readily that it provoked alarm in imperial circles – in 1887 Mysore, whose family had only recently regained their kingdom after fifty years of colonial usurpation, was asked to cease making contributions.[120] Of course, all orders were not meekly obeyed: twelve years later the viceroy, interrogating the maharajah of Baroda, discovered that the latter was still giving to the Congress, while more than one ruler secretly financed the election of a Congressman to the House of Commons in London.[121] In fact, princely patronage was extended to regional nationalist clubs too. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in the Bombay presidency, for example, full of 'men with tainted views' and supposedly diabolical designs,[122] was

funded not only by local rulers but also by southern maharajahs; the Deccan Education Society, which ran an institution attractive even to gun-wielding revolutionaries, obtained in excess of 2,00,000 rupees in princely gifts in its maiden twenty-five years of existence.[123] With the Congress, while support from Indian princes is presumed to have withered by the First World War – reflecting fears that nationalism might devour royalty too – there is evidently 'tantalizing evidence' of 'undocumented continuation of princely aid' behind the scenes.[124] After all, it is not impossible that at least some maharajahs confronting extinction attempted to negotiate with their executioner. Curzon, for instance, was convinced as late as 1925 that there were a 'number of Philippe Égalités' (after a Bourbon prince who supported the French Revolution) among the rajahs, with an 'ardent sympathy' for democracy.[125]

What is known for sure, however, is that in the period between the 1860s and the first decade of the twentieth century – the years chiefly covered in this book, and when Ravi Varma was active – Indian nationalists endorsed the legitimacy of the maharajahs.[126] Indeed, many rulers were seen as nationalists themselves, and several nationalists saw the states as rallying points in their fight against colonialism. As a historian of the Congress tells, at this juncture the party was 'less interested in whether chiefs lived up to the representative and liberal political principles' they espoused; irrespective of whether a ruler was good or bad, he was respected, the Congress's chief concern being whether 'the British honored the independence of the states'.[127] Territories under native control were spared the worst of imperialism, and both prestige and sentiment were tied to their survival. While many Congressmen did feel that absolutism would need to be jettisoned, it was *Indian* initiative they urged, not foreign interference. So, when the maharajah of Mysore died in 1894, the Congress officially mourned him. His 'constitutional reign', it was said, was proof that Indians could govern without the British intervention that masqueraded as guidance.[128] To these early nationalists, in fact, princes had a role even in a democratic future: M.G. Ranade, a Congress founder, visualized the Indian parliament as featuring an elected council resembling the Commons, with rulers

constituting a corresponding House of Lords.[129] At this point, the right of the maharajahs to also speak for India was not questioned, and as we shall see through the states covered in this book, even conservative royal figures were treated with understanding and reverence.

There were other interactions too between nationalists and the states: in 1916 a Congress president praised rulers for rewarding Indian administrative talent with positions of authority – while brown men wasted away in minor posts in British India due to racial prejudice, in the states they found the platforms they deserved.[130] Indeed, this last point firmly punctured colonial biases. Belief that Indians were horrendously bad at governance dominated the highest echelons of the Raj. Curzon, for example, when asked to consider native representation in his council, declared: 'In the whole continent there is not one Indian fit for the post.'[131] When in 1892, as alluded to before, a Congressman won election to the British parliament, the governor of Bombay sent congratulations, but in private unleashed a jaundiced pen. 'I am very disgusted at Dadabhai Naoroji getting elected to the House,' said Lord Harris. 'Why England should elect natives I can't for the life of me see: they can't govern themselves. Why should they govern us?'[132] It was with relish, then, that nationalists highlighted the achievements of administrators in *princely* India, who established standards often superior to British rule – men like Seshiah Sastri, Dinkar Rao, Madhava Rao and Salar Jung, to name a few. Or as K.M. Panikkar argued, princes 'provided opportunities for Indians to demonstrate and develop their capacity for political and administrative affairs'. They helped develop 'a school for Indian statesmanship' and 'offered fields for men of capacity' whose complexion had placed a limit on what they could achieve in foreign-ruled parts of their own motherland.[133] Arguments on the native ability for self-rule could be won by pointing to royal India, thus, whose princes and ministers became heroes and much-needed icons in the fight against colonialism.

It was these very 'native statesmen' and maharajahs that Ravi Varma depicted with flair and glamour, and it is they who form the substance of this book – persons who, before nationalism moved to the phase of

mass politics, manifested Indian aspirations, and gave many generations a sense of confidence. Ravi Varma was a favourite portraitist for these Victorian role models who demonstrated success and claimed Western modernity for native causes. Several of the statesmen – who would in time be associated with the Congress – began as British clerks but rose under maharajahs to pan-Indian prominence. They thought of politics and constitutions, of governance and development, and ultimately of beating the British at their own rigged game of 'progress'. Some became active spokespersons for nationalism – such as Naoroji, who before making history as a British parliamentarian was a princely minister – while others worked more discreetly. But they all rose to the challenge of imperialism, reflecting on questions about their own identity. The princes were part of this shared feeling: in stressing autonomy, in improving their systems and in supporting Indian aspirations, they stood up to their colonial bosses. Politics was a triangular contest between the Raj, princes and anglicized statesmen – precisely why the understandings they reached were specific to this context. They do not fit later trends when the masses entered the picture, and Congress and the maharajahs grew to view one another as antagonists. That is, the Congress of the 1890s differed from its 1940s' avatar, just as nineteenth-century princes were not like their twentieth-century heirs. While the final assessment of princely India draws from this last, troubled phase, the earlier is not without significance – and that is the story this book seeks to tell.

Of course, trying to offer a comprehensive record of princely politics is a daunting task. There are very many states to choose from, and quite a few remarkable figures. This is where Ravi Varma enters the picture. By following his professional peregrinations through five states, this book draws an account of their rulers and ministers, for all of whom the artist did portraits. Ravi Varma himself is not our subject, and though there are biographical snippets, in most chapters he makes only cameo appearances. It is his *world* that is of interest, and what the man offers is a thread to connect diverse kingdoms. We begin, thus, in Travancore, where he was born in the 1840s, and cover its transition from orthodox 'backwardness' to the vanguard of 'progress'. Ravi Varma's visit to Pudukkottai in the

1870s offers an opportunity to study how a feudal state, dominated by a certain caste, faced twin pressures to Brahminize as well as bureaucratize. In Baroda, where he went in the 1880s, we witness conflict between right and might under the Raj, as well as the career of a maharajah who proved one of colonial rule's sharpest princely critics. Mysore, where the artist did portraits for two generations of rulers, on the other hand, was home to a subtler brand of nationalism, with industrialization as its vehicle of resistance. Meanwhile, given how Ravi Varma was himself related to royalty, his family portraits open a window into intra-dynastic rivalries, gender, changing cultural mores and connected themes. The book concludes, finally, with Udaipur, whose ruler, defying all pressure to modernize, and eschewing even the English language, prevented British inroads into his realm; when he was toppled, it was not by the Raj but by peasant agitation – evidence, perhaps, that even without Congress-type politicians, the maharajahs would have faced trouble in the end.

All in all, princes and statesmen who appear in Ravi Varma's portraits are part of India's evolution in the colonial period. These protagonists were not mass leaders, but this should not blind us to their achievements. For in the end, resistance to British imperialism took multiple avatars – often in the most unusual places, in ways that were both deceptive and ingenious.

The 1971 commemorative stamp issued by the Government of India to honour Ravi Varma.

The following chapter provides a brief history of Travancore at the time of Ravi Varma's birth in 1848, and the state's experience of British colonialism, revelatory also of the general pressures and challenges nineteenth-century princes faced.