

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Princestan: How Nehru, Patel, and Mountbatten Made India, edited by Sandeep Bamzai, Rupa Publications India, October 2020**

*“Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.” -William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night*

As the sun of democracy dawned upon India on the midnight of 14-15th of August 1947, these timeless words comforted the nation that withstood the agony of partition – “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history when we step out from the new – when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.” These timeless words were addressed to the nation by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as he spoke to the Constituent Assembly on the midnight of 14th-15th August. And with this, began the pilgrimage of a billion people towards the ideals of democracy, self-rule and stride towards the dreams that were for India, but also for the world.

The virtue of India, which has allured writers and travellers of the yore, is her sheer scale of size. In India, we endured the largest non-violent struggle for freedom. At the culmination of it, we drafted a constitution so extensive as to be regarded as the lengthiest of all ever produced by man. Independence, which they claimed after a long trail of sweat and blood. Independence, which they hold dear to their hearts and souls. But seldom do they ponder about the labour it took to stitch the loose threads of small states and principalities, and weave them into a union of states able to stand the odds of time and diversity. This is the story of the making of the Republic of India.

Author Sandeep Bamzai narrates this story in his book “Princestan - How Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten Made India.” As is widely known, the British Parliament, through the Independence of India Act, of 1947, granted the transfer of power of the territories directly under the British Raj, to the newly created dominions of India and Pakistan. Princely states, that more than five hundred in number, were left to their will to choose and determine their future. These states were free to join either of the newly created dominions or to declare themselves sovereign states. As history has it, no state chose, or perhaps more prudently – was able to choose, the latter course. An overwhelming majority of these states joined the Indian Union, and some joined Pakistan.

The title of the book ‘Princestan’ – in line with the terms Hindustan and Pakistan, talks of a loose confederacy of Princely States and Principalities ruled by hereditary rulers under the paramountcy of the British Crown. The book is divided into twelve chapters and styles an introduction and prologue at its commencement. Many books have been written so far on the merger of princely states into India, the most credible one being written by V.P. Menon, the then Secretary of the Department of State Affairs - The Integration of Indian States. However, there are certain features that make this book a unique text. One such feature is the way the author has narrated the turn of events using Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Lord Louis Mountbatten as three integral pillars of the whole story; as these three political figures were directly responsible for the events in their capacities as – Prime Minister, Minister of Home Affairs and State Affairs, and Governor-General respectively.

It is generally accepted that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was the man of the hour during the integration of princely states in India. Mountbatten, being a distant relative of the British Monarch, and having unopposed sway amongst the Indian Princes and Rulers, evidently had a significant say in the affair. Nehru is put less in focus, if not criticised, on this matter. The author takes a remarkable stand and portrays Nehru as a leading protagonist in the whole drama unfolding between the kings. He writes “Nehru was the progenitor of the idea of breaking the back of the princes, his visceral hatred for them shaped by Fabian Socialism and a brutal jail stint in Nabha in the early 1920s.” (pg. viii) The author tries to highlight how Nehru’s perceived Fabian notions of his days in Europe, and his unpleasant experiences during the early days of the national movement, largely shaped his vision in regard to the situation with the Princely States. Later he again asserts “...and though the idea of an Integrated India emanated from Nehru, who wanted the princes and their fiefdoms dismantled, it was Sardar who showed the steel, resolve and the spine after Independence. But it is not as if Nehru took a back seat after 15 August 1947 in this regard.”

Another character highlighted by the author in the book is Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma, Governor-General of the Indian Dominion, and the Viceroy of the erstwhile British Raj. The author writes “If Nehru was the fulcrum in the idea that there would be one India which included both the British-governed provinces and the Princely States, bound by the treaties to the British through the doctrine of paramountcy, then Mountbatten played an equally important role in breaking down the resistance of the princes to the concept of integration.” (pg. 30) Mountbatten’s role is complemented by that of the Princely rulers who were vehemently in favour of integration with India – such as Sir Sadul Singh of Bikaner – who vehemently advocated complete integration and even addressed a secret note titled “The Time for Right Decision: An Appeal to the Princes” to the Chamber of Princes. The author has proven successful in highlighting the roles of such figures, who are essentially ignored when we dispense credit for the integration and consolidation of the Indian Union.

Of the attempts made by Princely rulers to declare independence, the author writes “But ‘keep a bit of India’ remained a theme with the Monarchists and hope lingered as princes, their Prime Ministers, and Dewans, under the bidding of the British Political Department in frontline states of Kashmir, Hyderabad, Bhopal, Jodhpur and Travancore played the procrastinating game flirting with the idea of independence and even Princestan. Interestingly, the US State Department was also fishing in these troubled waters.” (pg. 100) The author goes on to narrate the bizarre story of the race for thorium reserves found in Travancore, which were critical for the development of nuclear power capabilities.

The author has also tried to capitulate the loose threads of the historical accounts about how a few princely rulers were biased in their view against secular India and were supporting the communal bid of the Muslim League. Nawab of Bhopal, in his capacity as the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes, was the harbinger of such efforts. “...because of the Chancellor and his mindset, Muslim League outlook and policy dominated the workings of the Chamber’s Secretariat. It was done in a shadowy but cunning manner. The three Departments of the Narendra Mandal – the General Secretariat, the Constitutional Affairs Secretariat, and the Publicity Secretariat – were directly under the helmsmanship of persons with subjective viewpoints in that they were reactionary and even communal in their approach and outlook.” (pg. 188)

Succinctly, it can be concluded that “Princestan: How Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten Made India” is a book presenting a fresh take on a consequential segment of the history of modern India. The author has established the novelty of the book by bringing in new facts and their interpolations about the sequence of events that led to the integration of states in the Indian Union. For first-time readers, Princestan is a fair and trustworthy text on the history of the events around the accession of states. The author writes in the epilogue “The journey has been fulfilling, my interest has been galvanised, and the hunger for history has only grown in this time.” Perhaps this is how this book will leave its readers too.