



PRINCELY INDIA: 1858 - 1947

RODERICK MATTHEWS

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By Roderick Matthews

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Although by 1858 the British were unquestionably the supreme power in India, still about 40% of the landmass and a quarter of the population remained in the hands of traditional ruling dynasties. This 'Indian' India was never subject to direct British control. The Princes who ruled it remained in power, protected partly by British reluctance to incur the expense of conquering them, and also by the Princes' own willingness to play ball politically. This arrangement had many mutually beneficial aspects, of which the most obvious was that both sides enjoyed an enduring peace. The Princely States got by without the expense of large armies, and in return the British assumed limited rights to supervise the internal affairs of the States, expecting 'good government' in return for the 'protection' that the native regimes now enjoyed as allies of the British Empire. From the start the British took upon themselves the right to make decisions for these States directly in the areas of defence and foreign policy, and over time enlarged this remit to include 'communications', a broad heading that covered railways, canals, telegraphs and postal services. The twentieth century saw this cosy relationship break up, as political reform, then the move towards independence profoundly changed the role the Princes were expected to play in the wider political life of modern India.

This eBook examines Princely India, asking what it was, how it worked and how, ultimately, it disappeared in the process of Partition and Independence.

Roderick Matthews, Historian, Obtained a First from Balliol College, Oxford in Modern History. Studied Medieval History under Maurice Keen. Studied Tudor and Stuart History under Christopher Hill, Master of Balliol College. Studied European History under Colin Lucas, later Master of Balliol College and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Studied Imperial History under Professor Paul Longford, Rector of Lincoln College.

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