



Maharanis

The Lives and Times
of Three Generations
of Indian Princesses

LUCY MOORE

By the Same Author

Amphibious Thing
The Thieves' Opera
Con Men and Cutpurses



Maharanis

*The Lives and Times of Three Generations
of Indian Princesses*

LUCY MOORE



PUSTAKA PERDANA



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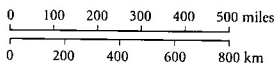
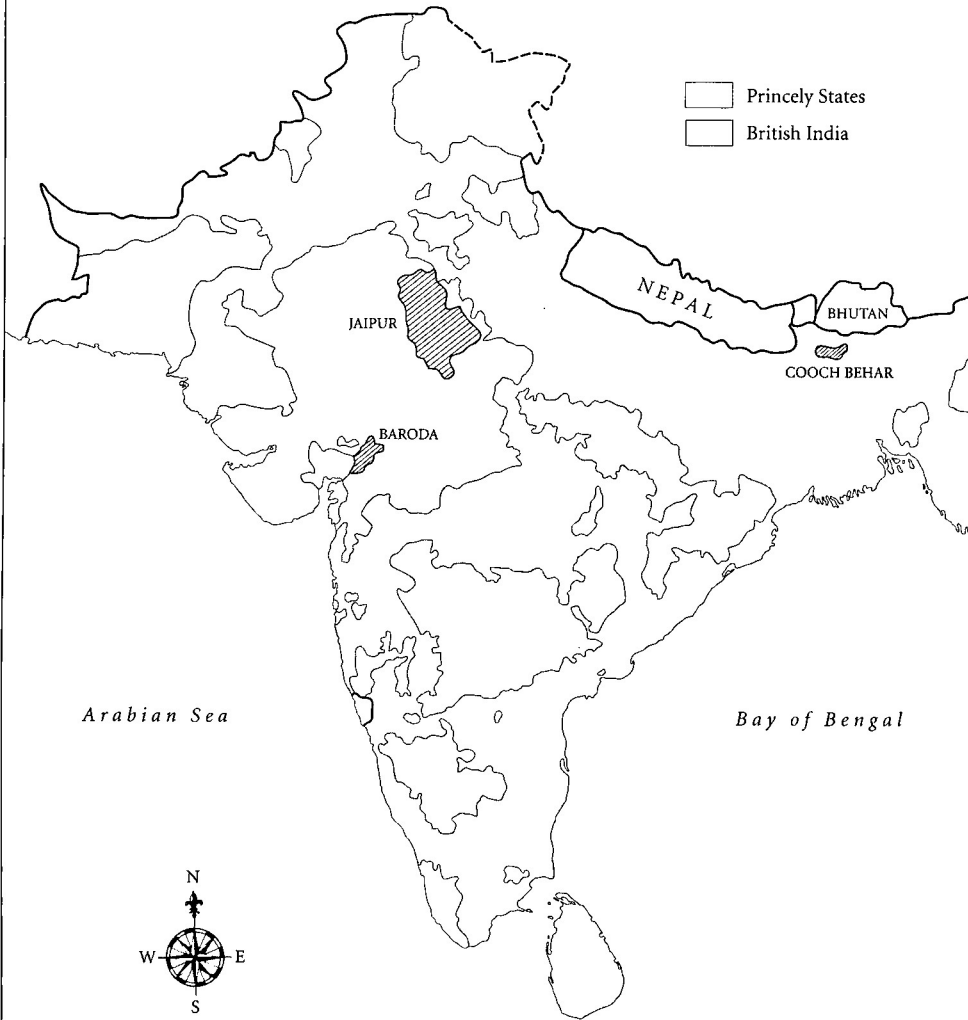
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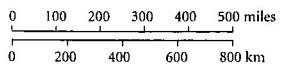
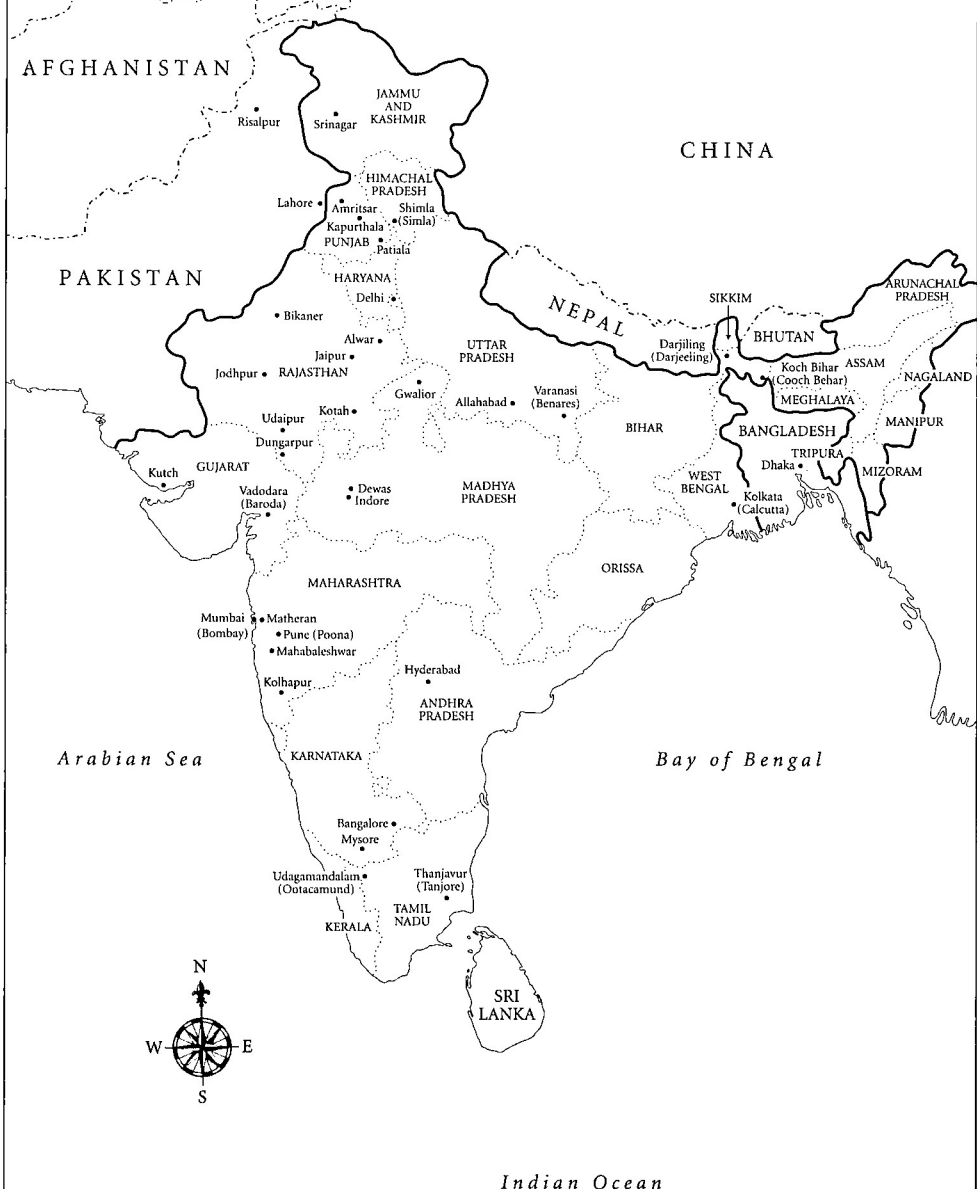
British and Princely India 1858–1947
showing the boundaries of Baroda,
Cooch Behar and Jaipur

- Princely States
- British India

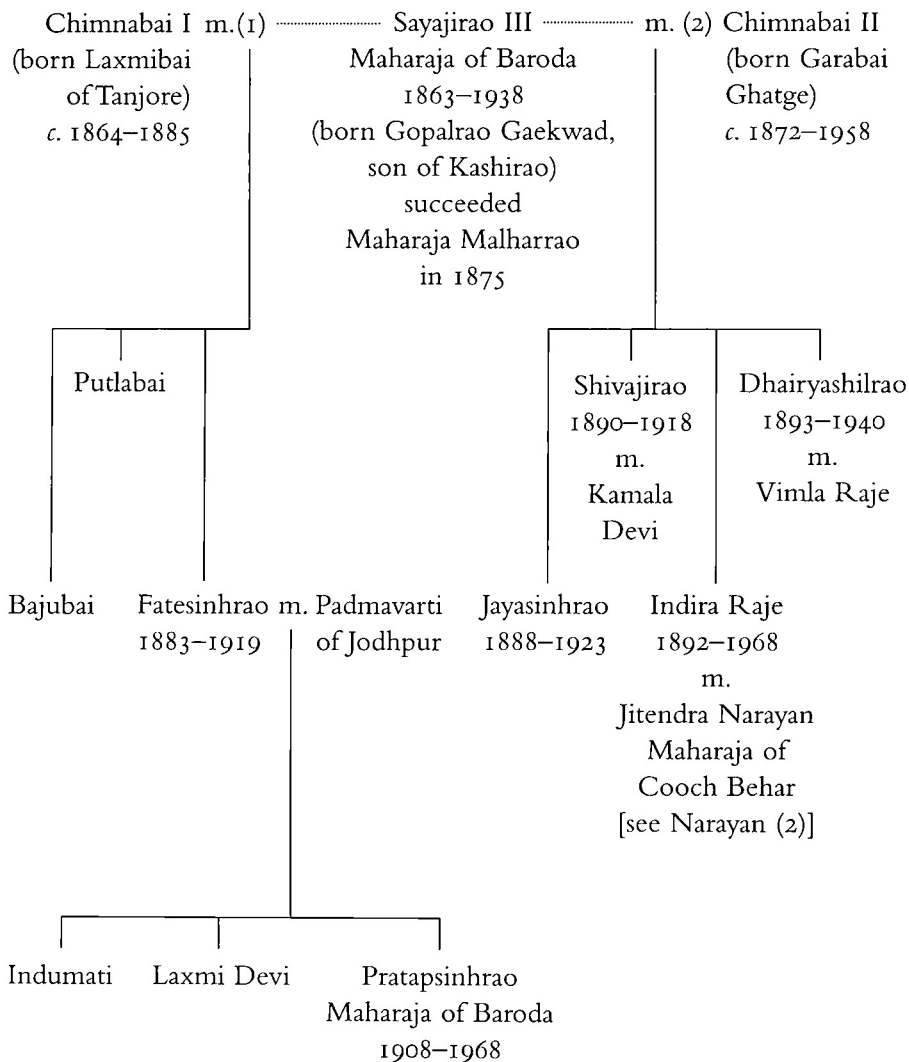


Indian Ocean

India post 1947- 8

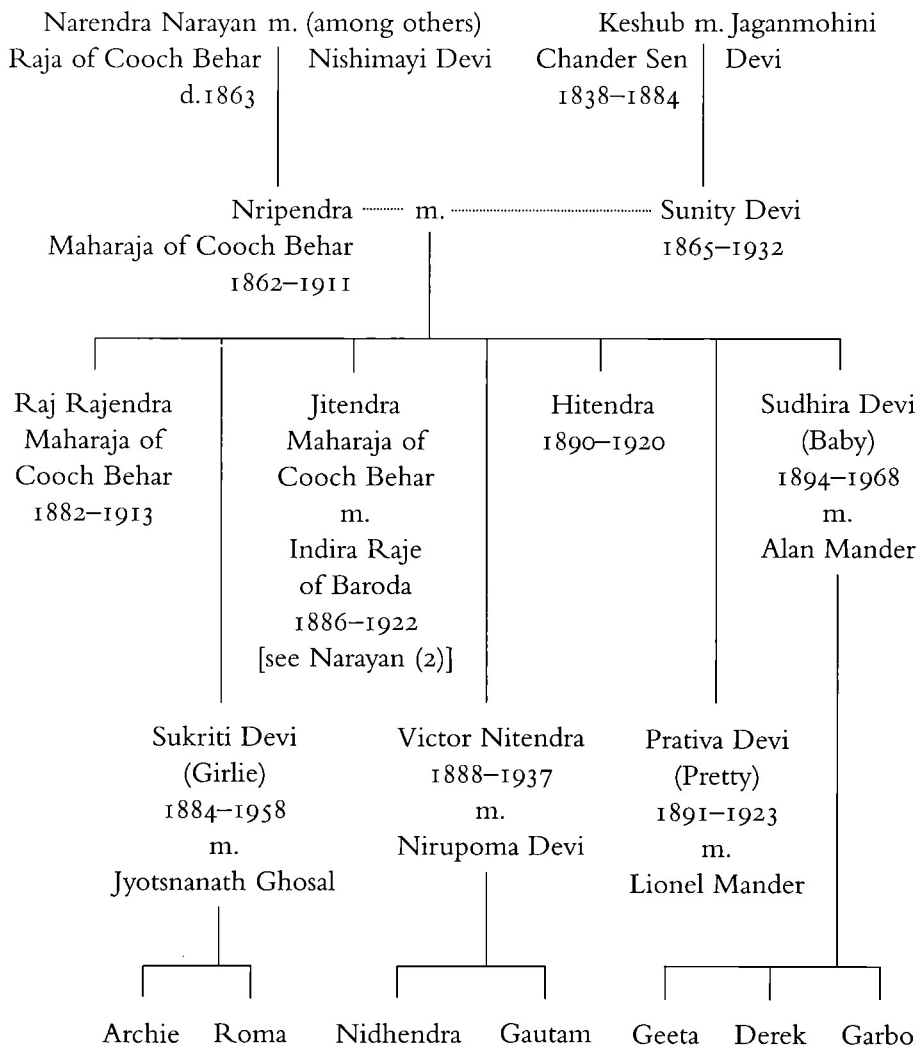


The Gaekwad Family

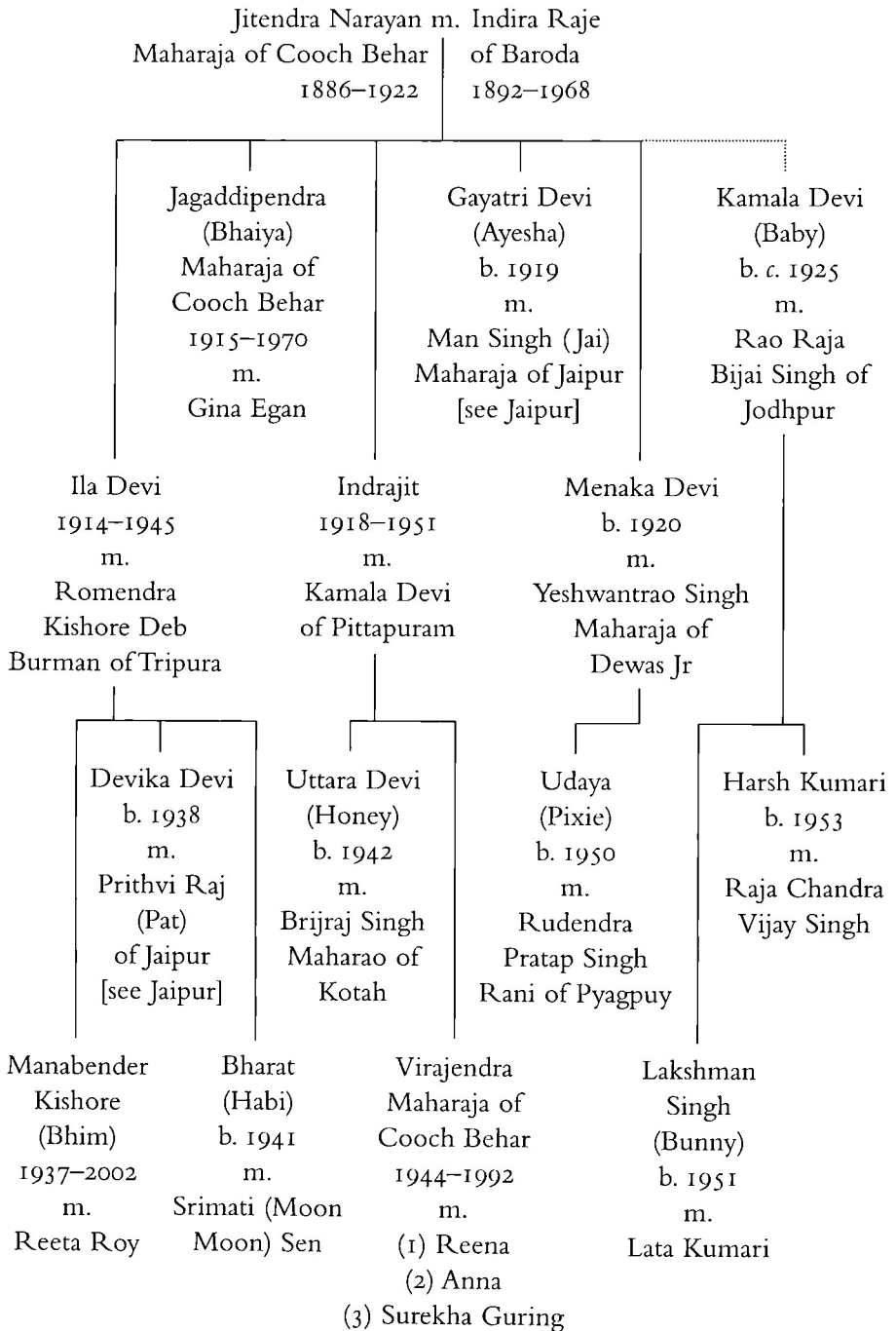


Every effort has been made to ensure these names and dates are correct but in some cases they have been difficult to verify.

The Narayan Family (1)

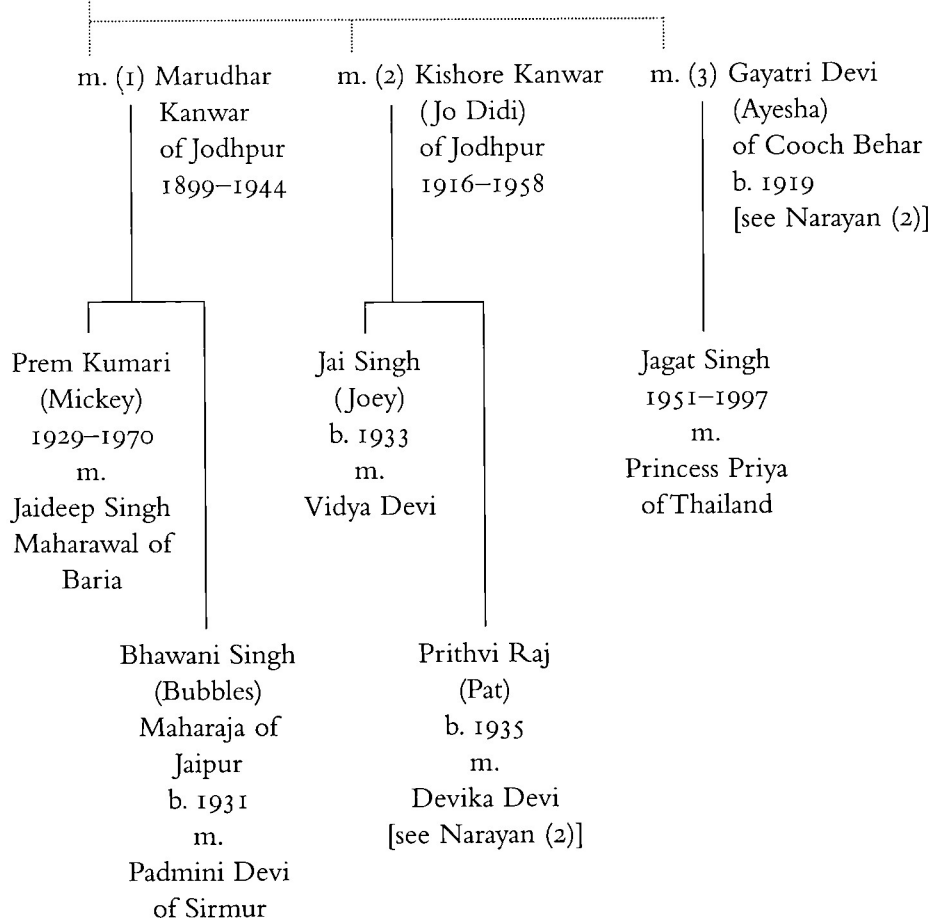


The Narayan Family (2)



The Jaipur Family

Man Singh II (Jai) Maharaja of Jaipur 1911–1970





I

In November 1911, it might have seemed as if every one of India's nearly 300 million inhabitants was heading for Delhi. The vast sub-continent's dusty highways were crowded with a caravan of carts drawn by bullocks and camels, pony-traps, gilded palanquins, humble bicycles and elephants with painted faces, all piled high with people and trunks and packages, travelling towards the crumbling red sandstone majesty of the old Mogul capital on India's northern plains. Every now and again a motorcar – modern and exotic – sped past, horn blaring. The scents of gasoline and drying dung hung in the air. Silky reddish dust settled thickly on everything, dulling the rainbow hues of the women's saris. Jewel-adorned maharajas with their veiled maharanis and sprawling retinues, bearded soldiers in kilts and turbans, white-swathed brahmins and arrogant British administrators with their lipsticked wives were all on their way to the great Coronation Durbar, intended to celebrate the accession to the throne of Britain's new king, and India's new emperor, George V, and to demonstrate to all the world that the British ruled the greatest empire in history.

The word durbar was traditionally used in India to describe a ruler or raja's court, his government, or his levees, but its most common use was for his great receptions, held in a durbar hall or a tented camp as he moved around his lands. It was a way for his people to see their king, to pay their respects and receive his government first-hand. The magnificence of the raja's clothes, his servants, his elephants and nautch, or dancing, girls, all attested to his wealth and power. He sat cross-legged on his gaddi, a cushioned stool-throne that symbolized his dominion, receiving his retainers' homage. He had the sole right to wear in his turban a jewelled, plumed aigrette, called a kalgi. Behind him stood liveried retainers in uniforms of dark velvets and cloth of gold. Some held

over his head a fringed chati, or large parasol; others fanned him with huge peacock-feather fans; still others bore the royal chamars, or fly-whisks, made of yaks' tails set in ornate silver handles. Here, surrounded by evidence of his majesty, the raja ritually received the tribute of his subjects.

In the autumn of 1911, India was gathering to pay homage to its foreign overlords in the person of the viceroy, Lord Hardinge, the King-Emperor's representative in India and the supreme governor of Britain's possessions there. He had ordered the erection of a vast tented city, Coronation Park, on the plains just north of Delhi, a quiet provincial town. Far from being a random choice, this was a site layered with imperial significance. During the rebellion (known by the Victorians as the Indian Mutiny) in the summer of 1857, Delhi, as the seat of the last surviving Mogul emperor, had been the symbolic centre of the rising. The British had camped on the site of the future Coronation Park before re-capturing Delhi and asserting their complete control over northern India. Both the first British durbar in 1877, during which Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, and Lord Curzon's durbar in 1903, celebrating the accession of her son, Edward VII, had been held there.

What the previous year had been fields of 'waving corn' was at the start of December 1911 a canvas city, the white peaks of its tent roofs like thousands of sails on a dusty sea. Coronation Park covered 28 square miles and contained 233 separate campsites. A light railway snaked through the site between sixteen mini-stations, though this was the first durbar at which automobiles were the preferred mode of transport. Every important state had its own motor-fleet; the official cars of India's richest state, Hyderabad, were all chrome yellow. Inside the camp, 40 miles of dirt road had been covered with a thick layer of black oil to stop dust blanketing everything. The newfangled electricity lighting the camp could have illuminated the British cities of Portsmouth and Brighton combined. Bakeries, dairies, butchers and fruit and vegetable markets supplied the camp's population of 250,000 with fresh food. Water was piped into each campsite. Thirty temporary post offices had been erected and 116 post-boxes dealt with letters addressed

in India's twenty major languages; telegraph wires stretched, crackling, overhead.

The King's camp alone spread over 83 acres. A broad red gravel drive approached the central reception tent between manicured lawns edged with potted ferns, palms and flowerbeds. The rose-bushes had been imported from England. The main shamiana, or marquee, was held up by slim white and gold columns; its walls were pale blue. Crystal chandeliers, powered by electricity, shed a glow over the proceedings. Persian carpets covered the boarded floors. The nearby state dining tent, similarly decorated, held 145 British and thirty Indian diners on the night of the state banquet.

The King's 120 predominantly English guests stayed in his camp. Their tents were warmed during the cool winter nights either by fires burning in marble fireplaces or, only in the King's camp, by electricity. The guests ate in three dining tents, smaller and less formal than the banqueting tent, hung with rich red drapes, and spent what spare time they had in pale blue and old-rose tented drawing rooms, or (if they were male) in the smoking and billiards tents. Kitchens, garages and servants' quarters clustered behind the main living tents. In the stable tents, every horse had its own syce, or groom, who slept alongside his charge.

Each of the important Native States – as the British insisted on referring to the hundreds of princely states whose domestic administration was controlled by a maharaja rather than the British Government of India – was required to attend the Durbar, and each had its own campsite. These were grouped together by region in a vast semicircle, some distance away from the main encampments of the King, the Viceroy and the British governors of the eleven provinces of British-run India. The campsites were laid out strictly in order of status and precedence; it would not have done for a mighty Rajput maharaja to find himself next to a mere raja from the eastern hills near Assam. The Maharaja of Baroda's camp even had a wooden pavilion, befitting his status as the third ranking (after Hyderabad and Mysore) prince in India. The emerald lawn was edged with palm trees and red gravel paths led to the canvas sleeping, dining, drawing, billiards and bath tents. Sunflowers, the

Baroda state emblem, grew along the site's railings. Overhead, saffron bunting snapped in the wind.

It had rained for two days before 12 December, the day on which the main ceremony was to take place. 'This transcended a joke,' observed a journalist, apparently worried that God was teasing the King by withholding fine weather from his Durbar. But on the morning of the 12th, the sun soon burned through the fine dawn mist. Before noon, the King-Emperor, George V, and his Queen-Empress, Mary, emerged from their dressing tents robed in ermine and purple satin, their sparkling crowns heavy on their heads. Escorted by scarlet-coated bodyguards and the Imperial Cadet Corps astride black chargers with snow leopard skins as saddle cloths, the royal couple drove in an open landau drawn by four horses to the durbar arena in which they would receive the homage of their Indian subjects.

Fifty thousand spectators were standing in the sunshine to watch the ceremony. Many had been transported to the durbar site from the Punjab, north of Delhi, to bolster the crowd. The Royal Pavilion stood at the heart of a semicircular amphitheatre almost 500 yards across. As the King and Queen arrived at the red and gold cupola and mounted the dais on to their gilt and marble thrones beneath it, a salute of 101 shots sounded, the Royal Standard was hoisted up the flagpole, the guards saluted, and 'God Save the King' rang out across the regimented plain. With a roll of drums the Durbar was declared open.

Using the ancient ritual of the durbar was just one example of how the British manipulated India's indigenous iconography to reinforce their position of dominance – or, as they termed it, their paramountcy. Like the Moguls before them, they embraced the durbar as a means of displaying their power to the Indian people and the Indian princes. Another demonstration of the way in which the British imposed their command through ceremony was the strict hierarchy into which they ordered the princely states, publicly displayed by gun salutes. The states were divided into 118 'salute states' ruled by maharajas, 117 non-salute states whose rajas (meaning king, as opposed to maharaja which means great king) were

more like clan leaders and 327 minor states under thakurs, or lords, with no jurisdictional powers. Some thakurs ruled ‘kingdoms’ of less than a square mile. Salutes for the top 118 states ranged from a 9-gun salute to a 21-gun salute for the five premier princes. The viceroy, the head of the Government of India, was awarded a 31-gun salute.

Originally, gun salutes were a way of allotting rank to regional rajas and nawabs, or Muslim princes, whose lands and wealth varied enormously. However, because gun salutes were not strictly apportioned, they were used by the British administration to solicit support and reward obedience. They soon became hotly contested marks of imperial favour.

‘If you were a prince with no gun salute, then every two penny-halfpenny Political Agent [the Government of India official detailed to every state; also known, in larger states, as the Resident] could come and visit you every three months and ask to see the accounts,’ remembered one member of a former princely family. ‘Whereas if you had a high enough gun salute, then the Political Agent could only come to you like a chaprassi [messenger], and if you had a 19-gun salute then you were left alone, because only the Viceroy could come and bother you. So the higher the gun salute, the less trouble you had – and this was the attraction.’

This was a common misconception among the smaller states about the bigger ones. The truth was that the British liked interfering in all the princely states, regardless of their wealth or status, though their interference was seldom appreciated. The British ruled a land they never really understood, for all their individual, specialized knowledge of Bengali waterways or Sanskrit poetry, and the princely states were the most elusive areas of all.

Imperial rituals like the Coronation Durbar illustrated the gulf between what the British thought about princely India and what the Indian princes thought about the British in India. Viceroys adored the extravagance and exoticism of durbars. Less than a decade earlier, Queen Victoria was barely in her grave before Lord Curzon begged to be allowed to represent her heir, Edward VII, at a magnificent reception to be held in honour of his coronation.

Many maharajas, on the other hand, endured them, acutely conscious of being forced publicly to demonstrate their submission to an alien power. Their homage was never as uncomplicated, or as unqualified, as the British liked to believe.

Before the 1911 Durbar, four of the five senior princes of India (Hyderabad, Mysore, Baroda and Gwalior; the fifth was Kashmir), each entitled to a 21-gun salute, requested exemption from paying homage to George. They did not want to bow down to him as vassals but to meet him as his allies and equals. Their appeals were rebuffed. One of the four, the Maharaja of Baroda, had suggested 'some alteration in the manner in which the poor native princes were to be received by the king'. By this, he meant some less deliberately humiliating reception. His request was ignored.

Sayajirao* Gaekwad, Maharaja of Baroda, was a reserved, gentle man of forty-eight. Of medium height, tending to portliness, he had a neat head of black hair streaked with grey, a clipped moustache, and intelligent, kindly brown eyes. He governed one of the richest and best-run states in India, situated in modern Gujarat, midway up the western coast of the subcontinent. Under his guidance, Baroda boasted compulsory education (not yet instituted in British India), modern hospitals, colleges, museums, libraries and railways. The Maharaja's politics were conspicuously liberal and progressive, and he was the only 'native ruler' who dared declare openly his longing for the day when India would throw off the British yoke.

In the years before 1911, resentment and frustration had built up on both sides as the Gaekwar (as he was known by the British, who generally misspelt Gaekwad, both a family name and an honorific) fought to retain his autonomy in the face of British officiousness and interference. In 1904 Baroda had been forced to request permission from Lord Curzon, whom he loathed, to travel to Europe for his health; having received this permission, he deliberately refused to return in time to welcome the Prince and Princess of Wales to

* '-rao' is a masculine Marathi honorific suffix; the female version is '-raje' (or '-devi' in Bengali).

Baroda when they toured India in 1905. Capping this snub, in the face of intense British disapproval Baroda continued to hire brilliant young Indian officials openly in favour of India's independence; his wife and children were outspokenly anti-British. Though Sayajirao had already been called into the India Office to discuss the 'disloyalty' of his attitude, like a truant child, until 1911 any incident had been avoided which might crystallize the hostility building up between the British and Baroda.

The Maharaja arrived at the amphitheatre on the morning of 12 December wearing Baroda court dress, a long double-breasted coat of fine, patterned muslin, tied at the side, over a pink and gold brocade tunic and plain white trousers, tight round the calves and loose from the knee up. A large plume of diamonds blazed in his neat, brick-red pugree (type of turban; see Glossary) and he wore a pearl and diamond collar. Quite deliberately, on this occasion, he had left off the ceremonial jewelled sword, carrying a gold-topped cane instead. He also neglected to wear the pale-blue satin sash and diamond Star of India, the highest imperial order. When he sat down in the front row of the maharajas' enclosure, he handed his necklace to his unadorned youngest son, Dhairyashil, sitting behind him. It was an inauspicious start.

The British liked their maharajas dazzling. The court outfit of the Maharaja of Patiala's son was a silk turban draped with strings of pearls and set with a diadem. Around his neck hung a collar of diamonds and four or five other diamond and emerald necklaces. His coat was fastened by diamond buttons, his wrists encircled by diamond bracelets, his waist bound by a diamond belt and a gold lamé scarf held together with a single fist-sized emerald. To appear without this brilliant display on the day of the durbar, just as when he wore European instead of Indian dress to official functions, was an assertion of Baroda's personal taste: unlike most maharajas, he seldom wore jewels, and resented being expected to do so to please the British. It was also intended to be, and was seen as, a calculated affront.

During the ceremony, each prince was to pay individual obeisance to the King-Emperor, approaching the marble dais, bowing

three times, and reversing back to his seat. No one was ever permitted to turn their back on the King-Emperor. Baroda was third in order of precedence after Hyderabad and Mysore. When his turn came, he approached the dais jauntily, his walking-stick swinging, and bowed only once, perfunctorily, before turning around and returning to his seat. A newsreel cinematograph shows him looking confused as he retreated, perhaps because he had not bothered to attend the rehearsal. Some accounts reported he waved his stick at the King and Queen, but this was not true. His approach was not dramatically dissimilar from those of the men who preceded and followed him. But there had been definite intent in his defiance of the ceremony's conventions, and this had not passed unnoticed.

Later that evening, as he strolled through the gaily twinkling campsites of Coronation Park, the Maharaja stopped at the castellated camp gates of his friend, the Governor of Bombay, Sir George Clarke. Pointedly, he was told Clarke was not 'at home' to him. The next morning, an Indian friend, Gopal Krishna Gokhale – one of the founders of the Indian National Congress (later the political party Congress) and an early mentor of Mohandas Gandhi – rushed into the Baroda camp, beneath the wind-blown orange bunting, and told the Maharaja that his bow, or lack thereof, had been taken as an insult to their Majesties. Baroda, aware the damage had been done, took advice from his Resident and wrote immediately to apologize to the Viceroy. Hardinge, a stickler for etiquette (especially where it concerned him; in this case, he saw an insult to the King as an insult to his own person) and already furious because the Maharaja had not stood up when he (Hardinge) entered the room on a previous occasion, refused at first to accept it. There were calls for Baroda's deposition, even his deportation; at the very least, said many, his gun salute should be reduced.

While the Maharaja pondered the price of disloyalty, not everyone in the Baroda camp was worried about political niceties. Baroda's beautiful, wilful daughter, Indira, was unconcerned by the furore her father's demonstration had caused. In a month she was due to

become the second wife of an immensely rich maharaja. The arranged match, uniting two powerful kingdoms, was a source of great satisfaction to her parents. Her trousseau lay ready in silken piles in her rooms in the rambling palace at Baroda. But Indira spent her time at the Durbar not with her family and fiancé, but in the camp of her school friends, Princesses Prativa and Sudhira of Cooch Behar, nicknamed Pretty and Baby.

Cooch Behar, far off in the north-east of India, was a lush, remote state whose glamorous ruling family was immensely popular with the British. As a family, they 'had the gifts of good looks and high style'. Elegant Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, who had died two months earlier, had served as ADC (aide-de-camp) to King Edward VII; his third son, Victor, was named for his godmother, Queen Victoria.

The degree of the Cooch Behars' integration into British society and manners was unique among Indian princely dynasties. Though several maharajas had, by the early twentieth century, decided that European polish was essential if they were to be well treated by the British (and several more decided that they liked the freedom, flowing alcohol and loose women available abroad) most retained their familiar habits at home and never lost their reserve with the British ruling classes. The Cooch Behars, though their state was geographically remote, traditional in custom and relatively unimportant politically, were in England well-known members of Edwardian high society in England.

The Cooch Behars were as unorthodox in religious matters as they were well connected in Britain. Despite her prominence on the social scenes of Calcutta, Darjeeling and London, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, Sunity Devi, was a devoted member of the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement that sought to fuse eastern and western cultures and membership of which made her and her family literally outcasts in the eyes of traditional Hindus like the Barodas.

Pretty and Baby had been to boarding school in Eastbourne, on England's south coast, with Indira of Baroda. It was only natural that on seeing her in Delhi the Cooch Behar princesses should ask

'Erudite, poignant and compelling. With this exotic and flamboyant story Lucy Moore brings India to life in a way rarely achieved by English historians' *Simon Sebag Montefiore*



'Lucy Moore has captured the richness and tragedy of the Indian princely favourites in the last days of the Raj and the new world of independence, focusing on the formidable personalities of four princesses as they emerge from purdah to stamp their personalities on their time. Exotic in detail yet clear in its historical treatment, this is a fascinating picture of a vanished world'

Sarah Bradford

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