

## Gun Salutes and the Empire

While it is true that the foundations of the British rule in India were laid on military might and conquest, once they were assured that there was no real threat or competition to their power, they started the process of 'co-option' of the princely states by giving them titles, medals and gun salutes to mark their loyalty to the Paramount Power, but also to let each of the princes know where they stood in the overall hierarchy of the Empire.

Thus, while the Paramount Power, the King Emperor of India was entitled to a hundred- and one-gun salute, the Queen Empress and other members of the Royal family as well as the Viceroy and Governor General were accorded the status of thirty-one-gun salute. The origin of the gun salute ceremony was the protocol privilege of the 'celebratory canon shots' by the Royal navy for a visiting dignitary. Later it was extended to the first arrival of a dignitary by land as well.

However, it assumed added the highest significance on the occasion of the Coronation Durbar held in December 1911 at Delhi. At that time, only the Maharaja Gaekwad of Baroda, the Maharaja of Mysore and the Nizam of Hyderabad were entitled to the twenty-one-gun salute. In 1917, the Maharaja Scindia of Gwalior was upgraded to a permanent and hereditary twenty-one-gun salute, and the Maharaja of J&K the same in 1921. This was a reward, acknowledgment and

appreciation of their soldiers' valour and heroism in World War 1 . Thus, at the time of independence , there were five princely states in India, including Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad which enjoyed the twenty-gun salute status – and this is what perhaps gave them ideas of asserting their Independence ! Many of these states were larger in area than Great Britain and had substantial populations as well. They were very conscious and possessive of their status , and tried to outdo each other in their display of fealty to the Crown . The First World War gave them an opportunity to contribute men and materials liberally to the War effort . This is how the Nizam of Hyderabad got the title of His Exalted Highness , and precedence over the others.

Next in the order of precedence were the six states of Bhopal , Indore, Udaipur , Kolhapur , Travancore and Kalat( which acceded to Pakistan ), and of these Bhopal , Indore and Udaipur were entitled to a local salute of twenty-one guns ! Local salute was hereditary to the ruler of an individual sate . Then there was a category called 'personal' , and another called 'personal and local'. Personal and local meant that while it was hereditary within the state , the entitlement was a distinction given to the ruler personally even outside the state. Typically, this was bestowed upon a ruler for distinguished wartime or civic service . This illustration will demonstrate the true import of these distinctions . Thus, Patiala was a seventeen-gun salute state , but with a local entitlement of nineteen guns. On the other hand , Kapurthala was a thirteen-gun salute state , but with a local and personal rank of fifteen guns !

It may also be placed on record that while there is a constant reference to 562 states in India , only one hundred and eighteen states were salute states. The others were actually too small , very often with territories less than fifty miles , and more in the nature of big zamindars , rather than princes. Thus, for example we had states in Saurashtra and Odisha which were not even in a position to maintain a single police station !

The Political department of British India treated the princely states strictly according to their status and hierarchy. Thus, the five premier ( twenty-one-gun salute ) states had an individual envoy or Resident , whereas the other one hundred and thirteen salute states were grouped together within political agencies (groups of states) under a political agent . These political agencies were the precursors to the administrative construct of seven - fold grouping of princely states by the States Department : Punjab states, Rajputana, States of Western India, Central Indian states, Deccan states, Madras States (for Cochin and Travancore) and Eastern states.

Readers would also find it interesting to note that two of the most prominent (global) religious leaders of those times : His Holiness the Dalai Lama ,and His Holiness the Aga Khan were also accorded the status of a nineteen and eleven gun salute respectively. The Dalai Lama was also recognized as the de jure and de facto sovereign of the Buddhist kingdom of Tibet – for the British always showed Tibet , not China as our Northern neighbour .

And finally, the political pensioners of the British Raj : the Nawab of Murshidabad , the Prince of Arcot ( Carnatic ) and the Raja of Vizianagaram were also accorded nineteen, fifteen and thirteen gun salutes , all of which continued till the abolition of privy purses in 1971. Incidentally , the Prince of Arcot is the only person in the country to continue with his privy purse , because the judicial verdict in his case was that unlike privy purses of other rulers who got their entitlement because they surrendered their territories to the Union of India, in the case of Arcot, it was the fulfilment of a Sovereign obligation of the Crown to which the Republic of India was a successor !

This merits a separate column by itself !