

Colonial Rule, Decolonization, and Corruption in India

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Published in: Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 53(4), (2015),

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2015.1089002>

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Abstract

This paper posits that the varied legacies of colonial rule and decolonization can explain interstate variation in the institutionalization of corruption in post-independence India. It concludes that the relative freedom from state capture after independence depended on two conditions: 1.) the institutionalization of bureaucratic autonomy prior to independence; and 2.) the survival of the disruption of decolonization by an autonomous bureaucracy to be utilized by new representative governments following independence. These conditions were generally not met across India with the exception of the southern state of Kerala.

Key Words

Corruption, Indirect Rule, Decolonization, India, Kerala

Introduction

Corruption—the use of state resources for private gain—is deeply entrenched across much of the former colonial world. Many researchers have persuasively argued that corruption in the contemporary developing world is at least partly the result of the institutional legacies endowed by the peculiar system of colonial rule (Acemoglu, Chaves, Osafo-Kwaako, & Robinson, 2014; Mamdani, 1996; Mulinge & Lesetedi, 1998). Colonialism created state structures that were simultaneously strong in terms of commanding the obedience of their subjects yet weakly embedded in society (Migdal, 1988). Or in Mann’s (1984) terms, colonial states possessed *despotic* power while lacking *infrastructural* power. The fracturing or decentralization of colonial state power that came with decolonization meant local elites were able to capture control of colonial institutions and exercise discretion in their use (for comparative evidence, see Kenny, 2015). In other words, with independence, state structures distinctive to imperial rule were captured by particular interests and redeployed towards narrow ethnic (Reno, 1995), institutional (Jalal, 1990), or personal ends (Callaghy, 1984).

Yet, colonial rule was a highly varied experience. The British, French, German, and Japanese empires governed their colonies in distinct ways with diverse developmental and political consequences for the postcolonial states that emerged from them (Feyrer & Sacerdote, 2009; Lee & Schultz, 2012). Not only did different empires rule their colonies in distinct ways, but the same empires often employed diverse institutional set-ups across time and space (Mahoney, 2010; Steinmetz, 2007). The British Empire famously deployed a dual system, in which parts of its Empire were ruled directly by British agents while other parts were ruled indirectly through indigenous subordinates. These directly and indirectly ruled parts of the Empire developed different levels of state capacity (Lange, 2004, 2009; Mamdani, 1996; Migdal, 1988), patterns of economic activity (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Lange, Mahoney, & vom Hau, 2006), and human capital (Lankina & Getachew, 2012). These characteristics in

turn presented very different opportunities and constraints for those who took over power after decolonization. Some types of colony were more prone to state capture than others after independence, with long-term implications for the institutionalization of corruption. In a few rare cases, especially smaller more centralized colonies (Kenny, 2015), administrative structures that were *relatively* free of corruption emerged from decolonization (Collins, 1966; Seekings, 2011), while in the majority of other colonies, decolonization wrought irreparable damage to any autonomous, professionalized state institutions that did exist.

India presents a particularly interesting puzzle in this respect. Despite the introduction of elements of a modern bureaucracy along with restricted legislative accountability prior to decolonization, after independence Indian institutions quickly became mired in corruption, especially at the state level (Brass, 1994). Yet, while India as a whole has tended to have higher levels of corruption than many other former British colonies (Kenny, 2015), corruption varies widely across contemporary Indian states with concomitant variation in the quality of public goods provision and human development (see Figure 1). The southern Indian state of Kerala stands out as the least corrupt in India while the so-called BIMARU states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) of the north are among the most corrupt. Table 1 shows that this is the case for both petty corruption—small scale appropriation such as bribery, extortion, or patronage—as measured by Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and grand corruption—large scale misuse of state funds such as in procurements or contracts—as measured by Jennifer Bussell (2012).

Figure 1 Corruption (CPI) in Indian states (2005)

Table 1 Corruption in India

Importantly, Kerala's exceptionalism is not a recent phenomenon. Retrospective measures of corruption are problematic to construct. One way of approximating historical levels of corruption is to look at the related concept of political patronage. Patronage, in this case meaning the provision of state jobs and promotions in return for political support (Chandra, 2004), is very closely related to other indices of corruption (Rothstein, 2011). Here I follow Leonardo Arriola's (2009) strategy of estimating patronage by the size of government cabinets. Cabinet size is partly a function of polity size (population and territory) and partly a function of time (as governmental roles become more complex). However, at the margins cabinet positions are also used as forms of political patronage. Faction leaders, representatives of ethnic minorities, or influential, narrow interest groups may each demand a cabinet portfolio as a form of spoil. Cabinet positions, including in India at this time, afforded their holder budgetary control and a host of other perquisites that could be used to entrench their own personal support base, and in some cases, to engage in personal enrichment (Brass, 1994). Larger cabinets are on average an indication of more extensive patronage. The advantage of this measure is that it allows us to compare politico-administrative units before and after state reorganization in 1956. Figure 2 illustrates average cabinet size across Indian states (excluding Kerala) compared against Kerala from 1950 to 1984.¹ Again, it is clear that while the upward trend in cabinet size is present in Kerala, cabinets are consistently well below the average for the rest of India's states.

Figure 2 Cabinet size in Kerala and India compared

Even though each measure of corruption has its weaknesses, given that they independently confirm the same story, we can infer with some confidence that there has been variation in the prevalence of corruption across India's states in the post-independence era, and that Kerala stands out as one of the least corrupt states in modern India. Although variation in the

extent of post-independence state capture is apparent from these different sources, there is still little consensus as to why this variation exists. Building on the cross national literature on the generally negative impact of indirect colonial rule on state building (Herbst, 2000; Mamdani, 1996; Migdal, 1988), recent work has looked to the subnational variation between the directly and indirectly ruled parts of India to explain contemporary variation in state quality and political economy (Iyer, 2010; Lange, 2009). Although cross nationally direct rule has tended to be associated with better quality institutional development (Lange, 2009), in the Indian case, some of the contemporary states with the lowest levels of corruption, like Kerala, were previously indirectly ruled. Moreover, a particular puzzle is why postcolonial corruption in India varies so much not just between formerly directly and indirectly ruled territories, but within them. The extent of state capture in Kerala has been consistently lower than in other former princely states.

To explain this variation, ideally we would be able to trace administrative structures from the late colonial period through decolonization to today. Problematically, however, the legacies of direct and indirect colonial rule cannot be used in a straightforward way to explain the patterns of state capture in post-independence India. Colonial era political units do not map directly on to contemporary ones. Many present day states are comprised of both formerly directly and indirectly ruled territories as shown Figure 3. In this map, contemporary state boundaries (2005) have been overlaid onto a detailed map of direct and indirect rule reconstructed by the author from historical maps of colonial rule (1931). A simplistic test would be to see if there is any relationship between the extent of indirect rule in each contemporary state and contemporary levels of grand and petty corruption. While the results in Table 2 suggest that indirect rule is negatively associated with both measures of corruption, the results are not statistically significant. In any case, such a test is unsatisfactory. State capture is best conceptualized and measured at the administrative unit

rather than territorial unit level. Even if a state's territorial boundaries change, the main institutions in the administrative capital might be relatively untouched. While we have some metrics for the extent of disruption to administrative structures in British India caused by decolonization (discussed below), we do not have comparable data for the princely states. In any case, most princely states were amalgamated or absorbed into larger units with independence so that there was no continuity even of administrative units in such cases.

Figure 3 Direct and indirect rule (1931) and state boundaries (2005)

Table 2 Indirect rule and corruption in India

In order to cope with these data issues, this paper relies instead on two qualitative comparisons, one nested within the other.² The first is to explain why British Indian units differed from the princely states and why as a set, these directly ruled territories experienced such extensive disruption that administrative capture after independence became the norm. British India ultimately came to comprise eight major provinces (excluding Burma) and five minor provinces, which were ruled directly by the Viceroy through the Indian Civil Service (ICS). As I illustrate in the next section, while British India had elements of a modern autonomous bureaucracy by the time of independence, its senior levels were badly depleted by decolonization for a number of reasons. The rest of the subcontinent was made up of some 560 allied princely states, which signed treaties of subsidiary with the British Empire. From the 1930s, the princely states comprised about 40 percent of the territory of India and a quarter of the population. Most of the princely states had low quality administrations that were little more than royal courts. In any case decolonization massively disrupted these administrations as they were absorbed into new or existing states. Yet indirect rule for the princely states was far from uniform (Naseemullah & Staniland, 2014). As Manali Desai (2006) has pointed out, several of the larger indirectly ruled states like Travancore and

Baroda had superior levels of institutional development to directly ruled provinces. Thus, the second comparison is to explain why Travancore (later to become Kerala) differed from the other princely states, Baroda in particular, in its transition from colonial rule.

These comparative analyses suggest that the relative freedom from state capture after independence depended on two conditions being met: 1.) the institutionalization of relative bureaucratic autonomy prior to independence; and 2.) the survival of the disruption of decolonization by an autonomous bureaucracy to be utilized by new representative governments after independence. These conditions were generally not met across India with the exception of the southern state of Kerala.

This paper concentrates primarily on the relationship between upper levels of the political and administrative parts of the government. Below the upper level of the administration (i.e. the ICS), the vast majority of the colonial bureaucracy was made up of locally recruited and trained officers. The lower levels of the bureaucracy remain seriously understudied.

However, there appears to be relatively broad agreement that at the local interface between administration and society in British India and the princely states, considerable petty corruption was the norm (Brass, 2010; Gould, 2007). Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence that there was an expansion in opportunities for the exploitation of civil service jobs as patronage during and after the war (Kamtekar, 2002), which likely exacerbated this problem. The reservation of clerical positions for Congress supporters through the “Political Sufferers”, those adjudged by the Congress to have been arrested or otherwise penalized by the colonial administration for their political activities in the independence movement, was a major source of patronage after the War.³ However, even at this level there appears to have been some variation. Although, there certainly was still petty corruption in the state of Travancore as I note below,⁴ it did not experience the same expansion of temporary and

underqualified recruits in the early years after independence. While these lower level dynamics call out for more research in their own right, the main theoretical interest in this paper is on the variation in the decolonization experience at the upper levels of the administrative state and how this in turn related to state capture and the institutionalization of corruption after independence.

This paper will proceed in three further sections. The first part analyzes the colonial state apparatus in British India and then assesses the effects of decolonization on the higher levels of the administration. As the Second World War, decolonization, and Partition progressed, the upper parts of the bureaucracy experienced a crisis of capacity. Across most of India, this disjuncture opened up the space for the political capture of the administration. The second section adds comparative evidence from the princely states with a focus on explaining Kerala's exceptionalism. A unique set of conditions allowed Travancore (later Kerala) to emerge from colonialism with an administration relatively free of corruption. A final section concludes.

From Colonialism to Independence in British India

In this section, I first set about describing the main aspects of India's colonial institutional structure before showing how the disjuncture of decolonization facilitated the political capture of the bureaucracy. By the early twentieth century, the ICS had become a relatively professionalized, politically autonomous organization. At this stage it was staffed largely by young Britons who had received a classical education in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London. Increasingly over the early decades of the twentieth century it came to include Indian as well as European members. The ICS was the key link between the villages, *tehsils*, and districts of the countryside and the British colonial administration in New Delhi (and through it, London). An ICS officer would be placed in charge of a district in

a position known as district magistrate and collector. The collector was, in effect, judge, jury, and executioner. Indeed, Indians referred to the exalted officers of the ICS as *Ma-Bap* or mother-father, such was the overweening paternalism with which they ruled. The Mutiny of 1857 soured relations between British administrators and Indian citizens, with the British administration developing a ‘bunker mentality’ in which the provision of public order took precedence over the concerns of the Indian public (Kudaisya, 1992). Yet, along with this development, the ICS carved out a late-Victorian ethos of paternalistic detachment that would characterize the bureaucracy until independence (Potter, 1996).

The interwar period saw the further professionalization of the senior bureaucracy. In 1923 the Lee Commission recommended the creation of a Public Service Commission (PSC) for India. The PSC began functioning in 1926 and covered all appointments to the all-India services and Central Services Class I and II. Then in 1930, at the first Round Table Conference it was decided “in every province and in connection with the Central Government a Statutory Public Service Commission shall be appointed by the Governor or the Governor-General as the case may be.”⁵ The first provincial PSC was the Madras Service Commission established in 1930, and in 1937 PSCs were established in the provinces of Assam, Bengal, Bombay and Sind, the Central Provinces, Bihar and Orissa, Punjab and North–West Frontier Provinces, and the United Provinces.

Even though the interwar period opened up the scope for Indian politicians to gain control over some patronage resources of the state (Brown, 2003, p. 219; Frankel, 2005, p. 23; Manor, 2006, p. 32), they were limited in their discretion at the highest levels (Beaglehole, 1977). A few examples will make this clear. Through the British provincial Governors, the Secretary of State retained control over all personnel decisions in the bureaucracy. In the United Provinces in the late 1930s, although Premier Pant toyed with the idea of reducing the

pay of provincial and all-India services in order to repair the province's fiscal deficit, it was clear that the Governor would intervene to prevent any such outcome.⁶ Ultimately, bureaucrats could not be transferred or removed for the expression of a politically unpopular opinion or for the refusal to perform favors for their Ministerial superiors. When in September 1937, Pant proposed transferring the District Collector of Saharanpur district, Jasbir Singh, to Muzaffarnagar, Governor Haig immediately inquired into the causes for the irregular transfer. As it transpired, the "proposal was put forward without any real justification or even knowledge on the part of the Premier" and was done in response to requests made by certain Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)s. Ultimately, Governor Haig's objections were sufficient to have Jasbir Singh restored to Saharanpur over the resistance of the Congress. Haig made clear that he would "keep a fairly close control over postings of District Officers and Superintendants of Police" and that he would not "agree to political jobs."⁷ Haig later warned of the increasing attempted encroachment of Congress ministers on the prerogatives of the PSC:⁸

I am feeling more and more strongly the importance of maintaining [the] position of Public Service Commission as against Government. There is no doubt that my Ministers dislike the necessity of having to refer appointments to [the] Commission and there is a marked tendency to try and encroach on the authority of the Commission. The object of Ministers I fear is to have much greater control over appointments in order that they may exercise political patronage, the very danger to provide against which the Commissions were appointed.

Thus, even though the Congress preference of political appointments to key development positions was already observable,⁹ as was the tendency for the Party to operate as a "parallel" administration to the government (Kudaisya, 1992),¹⁰ the autonomy of the PSC and the ICS acted as a check on the capture of state institutions.

That the ICS established this tradition of relative bureaucratic autonomy is ironic given the centrality of patronage to the practice of the East India Company (EIC) that had run India until 1857 (Brown, 1994, p. 54; Mason, 1985). Of course, there is no doubt that the detachment of the ICS from Indian society led to gross negligence if not outright abuse. The role of the British administration in precipitating and failing to respond to famine conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century stands out as its greatest crime (Davis, 2001).¹¹ In arguing that the bureaucracy was relatively autonomous, I am not making the claim that colonial government was benevolent or beneficial. Bureaucratic autonomy can cut both ways, as James Scott's classic *Seeing Like a State* reminds us (Scott, 1998). Rather, the point is that the legacy of an autonomous bureaucracy inherited from the Empire *might* have played a positive developmental role in the years after independence if coupled with the political accountability of democratic institutions as it did in the state of Kerala.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War and the process of decolonization that it set off marked a watershed in Indian history that closed off such a possibility for most of India. In addition to driving a wedge between the colonial government and the Congress, which refused to support the British war effort, the War had a profound effect on the administrative structure of the state itself. By the 1930s, the Secretary of State was already struggling to meet the quota of British recruits (Potter, 1973). First, the catastrophe of the First World War shrank the recruitment pool available (Kirk-Greene, 1980). Reports back in Britain of the political agitations of the 1920s and early 1930s had also dampened enthusiasm for service in India vis-à-vis other imperial postings. Yet, imperial policy was still guided by the view that British citizens should make up at least half of the administration in India and that British citizens should occupy the more senior positions. With the number of British recruits at an all-time low in the 1930s, the number of Indians recruited was artificially depressed to keep within the 1:1 ratio (Potter, 1973). The onset of the Second World War put this already

strained situation under further pressure as the draft meant that no new British citizens would be available for recruitment to the ICS during the War. At the same time, the increasing complexity of government as it became involved in more areas of social policy, significant population growth, the demands of working with representative government, and the need to extend the reach of the state to traditionally lightly supervised territories, meant that the administration in some of the more peripheral areas of British India was already being rolled up by the 1930s.

One of the infrequently mentioned facets of decolonization was the devastation of the ICS. Table 3 below gives a snapshot of the bureaucracy on the eve of the transfer of power. Madras, Bengal, and the United Provinces had the largest contingents of Indian ICS officers. Over the course of 1946–1948, fully 60 percent of the ICS departed. With an increase in territory of about two thirds and in population of one third, this strained the managerial capacity of the new Indian state to breaking point. In the United Provinces, for example, of the 178 ICS members in place at the end of 1945, just 84 remained after independence, of whom 27 were on deputation to the Government of India, service in another state (one), or on extended leave (all British servants pending retirement). That meant that UP was left with just 57 experienced civil servants to manage its transition to independence, when it had taken 178 to manage it under normal times. Moreover, the duties of the civil service had previously extended merely to maintaining revenue collection and law and order, while in independent India they would be tasked with a wide range of new developmental and welfare activities.¹²

This process not only weakened the capacity of the state vis-à-vis society but opened up significant scope for the political leadership to promote their favorites within the bureaucracy. This effect was felt across the directly ruled provinces of British India, but it is evident from Table 4 that promotion to national level civil service positions from the

provincial bureaucracy was greater in some states than in others. In the United Provinces and Bengal in particular, many of the Indian officer contingent were Muslims, who after independence opted for Pakistan, further hollowing out the state's administrative capacity. Although we cannot be certain, judging from the surnames published in the civil lists, the border states of the United Provinces and Bengal had a higher proportion of Muslim civil servants who departed for Pakistan after independence. The influx of Hindu refugees and conflicts over land in such border states further compounded the crisis of administration.

Table 3 British and Indian Members in Provincial Cadres of the ICS in 1946¹³

Table 4 Civil Servants Promoted from Provincial to All India Services (1946–48)¹⁴

It is important to stress that this hollowing out of the upper levels of the civil service was a *political decision* that was endogenous to decolonization. Not all of the disruption was because of the reluctance of British civil servants to continue to work under Indian political masters. In fact, a considerable number were removed through compulsory layoffs.¹⁵ Indian politicians were determined that no foreigners should hold positions of power after Independence. As Patel put it, the Congress Working Committee had “flatly repudiated the claim of foreigners to remain any more in seats of authority and has categorically declared that it was inconsistent with self-respect for the people's true representatives even to sit by the side of the white Ministers for the purpose of governance of the State.”¹⁶ In addition, many Congressmen believed that Indian members of the ICS were no better—or indeed were worse—than the British and should be eliminated with the latter. That the civil service and police rightly feared retribution on the returning to power of Congress is evident from the fortnightly reports.¹⁷

After the War, the government was compelled to rapidly increase the number of temporary and emergency recruits in order to keep the administration going.¹⁸ In some central government departments the number of temporary employees exceeded the number of permanent employees, even in senior grades.¹⁹ The Economy Committee set up in December 1947 and led by Kasturbhai Lal Bhai observed that it was not uncommon for members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) to receive one, two, or even three promotions in the space of just two years, when normally it should have taken around ten. One of the results was a decline in standards with candidates of lower grades being accepted.²⁰ In August 1947, the Secretariat Reorganization Committee again noted that there were personnel shortages in the Central Secretariat. It recommended the appointment of Provincial Civil Servants to posts in the center as well as the reemployment of retired officers and other organizational measures (Saxena, 1990, p. 36).

While local officials had always “depended upon informal alliances, networks and connections, to buttress the civil service’s own organisational weaknesses” (Gould, 2007, p. 14) the relationship between ministers and the upper levels of provincial bureaucracies began to exhibit the same informality. By the late 1940s, politicians greatly outnumbered experienced bureaucrats, and although they could not do without them, were able to force their will on them. The attitude of the Congress towards the civil service in the states after Independence could not be much clearer. One Minister, speaking to villagers in his district, said of the IAS district collector who was accompanying him, “This man sitting before you is a member of the I.C.S. Yesterday he was your master, today he is your servant. He is your dog, you can do what you like with him, today is the day of the people” (Noronha, 1976, p. 72). Such attitudes were far from unique. In fact, it was typical among Congressmen to view the bureaucracy or indeed any institution as directly subservient to legislators. As G. B. Pant put it, “To fetter the discretion of the Legislature would lead to anarchy” (Austin, 1999, p.

86). In short, there had been considerable erosion of the principle of bureaucratic autonomy, at least at the state level. Indeed, even by 1946, powerful local politicians had begun to successfully inculcate the nexus of relationships between business groups, party factions, and corrupt administrators that would come to be known as the ‘permit-license-quota-raj’ (Bardhan, 1998; Brass, 2010, pp. 175–177).

Part of the reason that corruption would be a particular problem in the states even though the Union government at the center remained relatively free from it, was the quasi-federal institutional design of India’s new state. It is well known that Patel, India’s first Home Minister, stressed the need for an administratively strong center and pushed hard for the retention of the all-India administrative services. However, ultimately Nehru went along with a framework for the administration that represented a middle ground between conservatives like Patel and extremists like Rohini Kumar Chaudhri and Dr. P. S. Deshmukh who advocated the complete dismantling of the ICS.²¹ Although Indian members of the ICS kept their jobs, they were henceforth subject to political interference. While the provincial (subsequently, state) elites conceded to Patel the continued existence of these all-India services, they retained extensive discretionary powers. Recruitment to the highest levels of the public sector remained removed from political intervention, but outside of recruitment, “Decisions taken on many other matters were demonstrably respectful of the provincial susceptibilities and left substantial autonomy with the provinces” (Maheshwari, 2005, p. 116). Among other issues, this applied to cadre strength, the rules of selection for the provincial service quota, benefits, leave and terms of service, and allotment of officers. At the Premiers conference in 1946, it was agreed that a quarter of posts in the IAS cadres were to be reserved for promotion from within the lower provincial services (see Table 4).²² In this way, Chief Ministers of the states gained an important source of leverage over the provincial bureaucracies. Despite making considerable concessions as regards the formal structure of the

administrative services, the political leadership of the states would thus attain their objectives in other ways.

While IAS (the ICS successor) members could not be arbitrarily dismissed, they could be transferred to another posting for any reason, and they could be suspended on one-third pay for extended periods. For the Chief Minister and Cabinet of a State in the Indian Union, these were significant sticks to hold over civil servants. In this way disagreeable civil servants were easily marginalized and the rest soon made to toe the line (de Zwart, 1994; Iyer & Mani, 2012; Wade, 1985). Although there were formal rules that sought to preserve the integrity and neutrality of the IAS, in practice, this often did not occur (Dwivedy & Bhargava, 1967, p. 17). In 1951, an official review of the administrative services by A. D. Gorwala (1951, pp. 23–24) referred to several incidents of direct MLA interference in the relocation of district collectors in order to coerce them into taking particular actions. Nehru himself advised chief ministers on 1 August 1949, “...there is one matter which is bad in itself and which also leads to evil consequences. That is the interference of MLAs in the administration. Members of the Assembly have no business to interfere in this way with the local administration. If they do so, they free the district officers from all responsibility and then nobody is responsible.” He further argued, “if MLAs interfere in appointments, in transfers, in the grant of licences etc., then all responsibility vanishes and nepotism and corruption creep in.” In practice, there was little Nehru could do to limit politicization in the states. It was implicitly understood that as long as Nehru wanted to keep Congress’s multiple factions within the Party fold, he would have to tolerate politicization of the administration at the subnational level. What all this meant, as Paul Brass documents in the case of Uttar Pradesh (formerly United Provinces), regional political elites like Charan Singh were able to use their control over the administration to channel government spending to their clients and entrench their bases of power (Brass, 1965, 2010).

Sarkar's (1983, p. 4) summary is typical of the view that the ICS was maintained intact after Independence: "The Congress fought against the Raj, but it was also progressively becoming the Raj, eventually taking over without major change the entire bureaucratic and army structure, the 'heaven-born' civil service and all, merely substituting the brown for the white." The ICS was the incorruptible 'steel frame' on which India's new leaders built their administration. This interpretation needs to be put to rest. As Kaviraj (1997, p. 56) rightly summarizes, there is "a myth of an exaggerated continuity between the late years of colonial rule and the early years of independent power." This myth, and in particular the myth of the persistence of the "steel frame" of the ICS, needs correction. A re-reading of the vast secondary literature and the fresh analysis of a wide range of archival sources suggests that the corruption of the post-independence Indian bureaucracy owes in part to the disruption of decolonization, which opened up the space of the political capture of the administration. The decimation of the administrative institutions of the state and their rapid reconsolidation under new terms facilitated the politicization of the bureaucracy. Following decolonization, the administration henceforth no longer had the protection of autonomy from political interference.

The Princely States: Explaining Kerala's Exceptionalism

The situation in the princely states was much different. Unlike in the directly ruled provinces, administration in the small states was often simply made up of the entourage of the royal family. This was particularly the case across the Western and Central India States Agencies where such small states were in abundance. Yet, there were a number of considerably larger princely states. Some, like Hyderabad and Mysore had populations and territories comparable to a European nation at the time. While the micro states were necessarily combined into new administrative states such as Vindhya Pradesh, some of these larger states were retained intact through to states reorganization in 1956. Jammu and Kashmir, Travancore, and to a

lesser extent Mysore, would retain their territorial integrity much longer. The purpose of this section is to explain why Travancore differed so substantially from these other states in particular, as well as from British India.

Travancore signed a treaty of subsidiary with the East India Company in 1795. As with other princely states, this meant that the native royal family could continue to rule, but the state would be restrained in its foreign affairs. Travancore and neighboring Cochin state were united at independence in 1948 and the Malabar district of Madras joined in 1956 to form the contemporary state of Kerala. Three conditions marked Travancore–Kerala out as *unique*. First, the princely state of Travancore, which was the core of the new Travancore–Cochin state from 1951 to 1956, had a relatively professionalized bureaucracy on the eve of independence; second, as a native state, its bureaucracy was entirely Indian with the result that this professionalized bureaucracy emerged from decolonization intact; and third, Travancore retained its territorial and institutional continuity through its accession as a state in the Union of India and remained at the administrative core of the new Kerala state when it was formed in 1956.

The first distinguishing feature of Travancore was that its administration was relatively professionalized. Travancore had a long history of effective state building, although modernization began in earnest only in the early twentieth century. Much of this modernization was either pushed through on British direction or in an attempt to stave off further British interference. As M Desai (2005, p. 465) comments, “Travancore was viewed as a corrupt regime that had to be reformed under British tutelage. Records from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries are replete with accounts of political interference from the British, including repeated threats of annexation.” However, reforms over the first half of the twentieth century turned Travancore into a so-called “model state”.

The *relative* autonomy of Travancore's colonial era administration was critical in the areas of the provision of health services like vaccination and in socioeconomic policy domains such as land reform, where implementation was relatively effective despite the policies running counter to the putative interests of upper caste Nair bureaucrats. Land reforms from 1926–40 resulted in a significant transfer of ownership away from Nair to Ezhava and other lower caste groups (M Desai, 2005, pp. 466–467). Even the caste-sensitive issue of vaccination was implemented relatively successfully. As Nair (2010), documents, Travancore's vaccination program was piecemeal and ineffective until 1940, in part due to a lack of supplies and qualified vaccinators, much as was the case in British India and neighboring princely states. However, once mass vaccination programs were rolled out in the 1940s, Travancore–Kerala attained a relatively high rate of inoculation, in spite of deeply entrenched objections of high caste groups over the close contact required between patient and vaccinator. Crude death rates fell rapidly, from 29.1 per thousand from 1931–41 to 22.3 per thousand in 1941–50, a drop of 6.8 percentage points. This is compared to an all-India decline of just 3.8 percentage points, from 31.2 to 27.4 over the same period (Manali Desai, 2006). That lower group demands for inclusion were involved in pushing through these progressive reforms is interesting (M Desai, 2005), but it does not mean that improvements in the quality of the administration were epiphenomenal. Progressive reforms during the late colonial era were not a necessary result of social pressure from below as the experience of Bengal suggests.

Even at the lower levels, which are not the primary focus of this paper, Travancore–Kerala seems to have stood out. Unlike much of British India, Travancore did not experience a massive influx of underqualified staff at lower levels during the disruption of the War. Indeed, by the late 1940s there were repeated claims from department heads that their workload had increased, clerical levels experienced a retrenchment,²³ with one circular noting that “Government have, therefore, decided that each department should bring about a

reduction of personnel especially in the grade of supervising agencies, clerks and peons by 10 per cent.”²⁴ Requests for additional clerical staff were denied in the years after independence, undoubtedly inhibiting the opportunity for politicians to use government jobs as a source of patronage.²⁵

While last Dewan of Travancore, C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer retained a high level of discretion at the top of the administration, the evidence suggests that the bureaucracy in Travancore was relatively free of interference from *local* elites, as was the case with the ICS in British India. That is, the line of authority though the executive branch was efficient if undemocratic. Moreover, although much maligned for his autocratic tendencies, Iyer pushed through a host of progressive institutional reforms (Ouwerkerk, 1994). Competitive exams were also introduced for higher level civil service posts and an independent public service commissioner was appointed.²⁶ It was the only princely state to take these steps prior to independence. Moreover, although prior to 1944, applications for appointments could still be received by the Dewan, from 1949 applications would exclusively have to go through the public service commissioner.²⁷ These innovations allowed its administration a relative degree of autonomy from political interference in the early years of independence. In early post-independence Travancore, there was no culling of favorites of the colonial era prime minister and no major relocations of bureaucrats. E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the Communist Chief Minister of Kerala, even bemoaned his inability to promote his favorites in the bureaucracy as late as 1957.

In contrast to Travancore and to a lesser extent Cochin, most of the princely states had weak and unprofessional administrations. Even though census records suggest that many of the mid-sized states of Rajputana had large numbers of individuals classified as working in administration, the quality of their bureaucracies was very low. In the majority of cases, what

passed for administration was little more than a royal court. This low quality administrative structure was true not only for the many micro states of Western and Central India, but also (if on a grander scale) for the large states of Hyderabad and Jammu and Kashmir. Crucially, even the better-run of these states, such as Baroda and Mysore, which were often described “model states,” had a surfeit of low ranking civil servants but a chronic lack of senior administrators capable of running a modern bureaucracy.²⁸ In almost all cases, even where a sizeable bureaucracy existed, it was based on patronage rather than merit.

Second, as with other Indian states, Travancore’s administration was entirely Indian at the time of Independence. During colonial rule, some of the larger states like Travancore accepted, or were forced to accept, Resident officers. These men were typically officers of the ICS who were tasked with advising the princes and their prime ministers on matters of policy (Fisher, 1991). Except for the Residents, however, European service in princely states was heavily restricted by a number of acts and circulars going from 1831 to 1939 so that whatever administrative capacity the princely states retained by independence was almost purely Indian.²⁹ The exigencies of the War further reduced the availability of British administrators and technicians to serve in the states, as the British recalled all men to provide service to the war effort with a handful of exceptions at most. In Travancore as of 1941, there were just four British citizens in the civil service. After the war, I could not identify any. This is compared with around 50 percent or 60 percent for British India.³⁰ The indigenous character of its bureaucracy marked Travancore off from neighboring British provinces like Madras and Bombay. Unlike the latter British provinces, Travancore could retain all of its senior administrators through the transition to independence.

Third, Travancore’s centrality within the new state after its accession to the Union was crucial and also marks it off from several other princely states, including Baroda. Although it

possessed one of the more modern administrations at the time of independence, Baroda was then submerged within the new Bombay state with Bombay (Mumbai) as its capital.

Whatever autonomous institutional capacity Baroda had, it was subsumed within a new and distant institutional structure.³¹ Similarly, with decolonization, other smaller states were formed into groups—Madhya Bharat, Saurashtra, Vindhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan—which became states in the Union. Administration of these states quickly fell under the remit of the Ministry for Home Affairs (MHA). With independence, the MHA quickly sought to replace and retire the existing administrators who it deemed to be poorly qualified. Although the lowest ranking state workers were often retained, wherever possible, mid- and upper-level state workers were retired on a pension equivalent to that available to civil servants in India.³² As a result, in 1949, V. P. Menon, the Indian administrator in charge of the integration of the states was left to bemoan their lack of administrative capacity in the states. He petitioned New Delhi for the dispatch of senior ICS officers from elsewhere in India,³³ but the need for such officers within formerly British India was already so acute that few could be spared for India's new territories. The result was the comparative hollowing out of administration in the formerly indirectly ruled territories and extensive capture of the state apparatus. For most of the former princely states there was simply little institutional continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods despite the indigenous nature of their administration.

In stark contrast, Travancore retained its territorial integrity with the transition to independence. Its colonial-era administration simply continued on after decolonization. In contrast, for Travancore, the implications of its territorial and institutional continuity were significant. Administrative decisions continued to be made from Trivandrum (Travancore's capital, now called Thiruvananthapuram). For instance, on its merger with Cochin, it was decided to retain the higher educational qualifications of Travancore in recruitment and bring the Cochin administration up to this level. Prior to independence, Travancore had determined

that even among the higher clerical grades, there should be a ratio of 3:1 of university graduates to non-graduates.³⁴ In contrast, Cochin had a ratio of 1:1. It was ultimately determined that the higher ratio of graduates should be retained through integration, thus maintaining the high quality of the Travancore–Cochin administration.³⁵ Thus, well before Malabar district was joined to Travancore–Cochin, the pattern of a well-educated, professionalized, merit bureaucracy was established. The administrative continuity ensured by Travancore's admission as a single state into the Union allowed this pattern to prevail after independence.

Of course, comparatively efficient as Travancore was, there was still corruption.³⁶ Most of the cases I found in the archives are examples of petty corruption at the bureaucratic level, but crimes like torture, extortion, criminal misappropriation, wrongful restraint and confinement, criminal breach of trust, theft and robbery also feature. In a state with little political oversight of the bureaucracy, they provide some evidence of the perils of bureaucratic dominance over the administration. However, the fact that these instances of corruption are clearly documented in the archival record, and that when uncovered they were harshly dealt with provides some indication that the Travancorean state placed some value on bureaucratic integrity. In 1933 alone there were 94 public servants prosecuted and 139 in 1934 (Government of Travancore, 1935, pp. 13, 72). Unfortunately, it is not clear how this compares with other princely states or British provinces. It is clear, however, that patronage was considerably more constrained in Travancore–Kerala than elsewhere in India after independence and that over the longer term, even petty corruption has been consistently lower in the southwestern state than in other Indian states.

It should be made clear that the preceding model does not provide a singular explanation for Kerala's remarkable postcolonial developmental trajectory. This topic has spawned a virtual

cottage industry of explanatory models. It need not be the case that these explanations are incorrect. Rather here I have simply tried to point to the neglected issue of continuity with the colonial period that makes Kerala, or rather, Travancore–Cochin stand out. Explanations stressing the prominence of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and other leftist political parties in the state (Heller, 1999; T. M. T. Isaac, 1982; T.M.T. Isaac, 1985; Nossiter, 1988), are by no means inconsistent with the evidence I have presented. Indeed, to the extent that the CPI was able to push through progressive legislation such as land reform, this necessitated a bureaucracy that was relatively free from local capture. Indeed, the fact that the CPI in West Bengal has been consistent with high levels of administrative corruption and a relatively less impressive record of progressive development, the evidence presented above may complement such social movement explanations.

Taking into account Kerala's distinctive bureaucratic inheritance may also enrich research that has concentrated on the role of Christian missionary groups, especially in the sphere of education (Kooiman, 1984, 1989; Mathew, 1999; Zagoria, 1971). Among others, Lankina and Getachew (2012) argue that the educational advancements promoted by missionaries enhanced the "human capital" of Travancore. As a result, the demand for democracy, professionalism, and the kinds of public goods provision it entailed should have followed. This may well be true. But, we would still like to know why demands for public goods were actually met in Kerala while they were not in other cases. Elsewhere lower caste mobilization has been characterized by its cooptation into the spoils system. A strong case can be made that the prevalence of high quality candidates made professionalization of the bureaucracy in Travancore possible. Yet, high levels of education were not sufficient to bring about bureaucratic autonomy. For this, some institutional mechanism is necessary. Some interstate comparisons will help make the point. Other princely states, such as Baroda and Mysore had comparably good educational systems, yet their successor states (Gujarat and Karnataka)

fared much worse in measures of corruption. In Baroda, as in Kerala, there was a highly educated and broad-based constituency in favor of the deepening and widening of social policy after independence (M Desai, 2005). However, unlike Travancore, which became the dominant policymaking entity of the post-independence state of Kerala, Baroda was only a small part of the much larger state of Maharashtra (later Gujarat). The relationship between the political and administrative wings of the state was set in Bombay not Baroda. Moreover, neither Baroda nor Mysore had developed a professionalized merit bureaucracy prior to democratization that might have held in check the tendency to politicize the provision of social welfare goods. With the incorporation of Baroda into the state of Maharashtra the native administration was largely eliminated. Thus the institutional support structure on which Baroda's colonial era advancement in education rested was badly damaged by decolonization. Thus, the role of education (and by implication of missionary groups) might be seen as complementary to the role of the administration stressed in this paper. The point, however, remains that Travancore was distinct in terms of the administrative institutions it inherited at independence and the way in which those institutions persisted after 1947. This institutional inheritance allowed it to remain a "model" state after independence.

Conclusion

There is now substantial agreement that colonial institutional legacies and decolonization are essential to understanding post-independence institutional development. In India, colonial era institutions and the process of decolonization had a major impact on the relationship between the political and administrative wings of the state. For much of former British India, with the depletion of the colonial bureaucracy and the failure to insulate the bureaucracy from interference in the tasks of implementation, politicians were able to effectively manipulate the resources of the state in order to further their personal and party goals. The administrative institutions of the state were—contrary to popular belief—drastically weakened by

decolonization and political interference in the reconstruction of the new state. In indirectly ruled India, there was typically little with which to begin institutionalization. Of the states, only Travancore had introduced a recognizably merit-based bureaucracy by the time of decolonization. Because this Indian bureaucracy survived decolonization more or less intact, it experienced less political capture through the period, and the state retained its comparative advantage in the impartial provision of public goods. What the Indian experience demonstrates is that categorical distinctions such as direct and indirect rule can be problematic. When it comes to demonstrating the effects of colonial legacies, the actual processes of inter-temporal transmission have to be demonstrated. The very particular circumstances of the transition to independence in India, from the departure of Muslim officers on account of Partition to the territorial reorganization of India's hundreds of micro states, suggest a strong role for contingency and agency as well as socio-structural factors such as education in explaining long-run political economic development.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Fox International Fellowship at Yale University for funding the research for this article. I would also like to thank Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Centre for Development Studies for hosting me in India from 2010 to 2011. I would like to thank Steven Wilkinson and the two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. Finally, I would like to thank Allison Ley for comments and editorial assistance.

Funding

The Fox International Fellowship at Yale University funded research for this article.

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Table 1 Corruption in India

State	Grand Corruption (Bussell) 2001	CPI (Transparency International) 2005
Andhra Pradesh	0.33	421
Assam	-	542
Bihar	-	695
Chhattisgarh	0.21	445
Delhi	1.00	496
Gujarat	0.63	417
Haryana	0.16	516
Himachal Pradesh	0.10	301
Jammu and Kashmir	-	655
Jharkhand	-	520
Karnataka	0.36	576
Kerala	0.00	240
Madhya Pradesh	-	584
Maharashtra	0.53	433
Orissa	0.18	475
Punjab	0.39	459
Rajasthan	0.17	543
Sikkim	-	-
Tamil Nadu	0.42	509
Uttar Pradesh	0.60	491
Uttaranchal	0.60	-
West Bengal	0.35	461

Table 2 Indirect rule and corruption in India

	Bussell Grand Corruption	CPI
Indirect Rule	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.150 (0.731)
	0.132*	0.839*
R ²	0.17	0.002
Adjusted R ²	0.102	-0.053
No. of states	16	20

Standard errors reported in parentheses

* denotes *p* value

Table 3 British and Indian Members in Provincial Cadres of the ICS in 1946³⁷

	British		Indian	
	No.	%	No.	%
Assam	31	50	31	50
UP	95	53	83	47
Madras	69	42	94	58
Orissa	7	41	10	59
Bengal	78	47	88	53
Bihar	50	53	45	47
Bombay	60	45	72	55
Punjab	93	61	59	39
NWFP	30	77	9	23
Total	513	51	491	49

Table 4 Civil Servants Promoted from Provincial to All India Services (1946–48)³⁸

State	No. of Promoted Civil Servants
Assam	2
Bihar	0
Bombay	1
Central Provinces & Berar	0
East Punjab	20
Madras	27
Orissa	30
United Provinces	34
West Bengal	38

Endnotes

¹ Data are drawn from yearly editions of the *Indian and Pakistan Year Book and Who's Who* (1950–53), and the *Times of India Directory and Year Book including Who's Who* (1954–84).

² Individual archival records and published government reports are cited as appropriate below. These are primarily drawn from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Political Department records at the National Archives of India (NAI) in New Delhi, and the Confidential Section of the Kerala State Archives in Thiruvananthapuram.

³ There are many files held in the Nehru Library Archives on the Congress party relating to the issue of political sufferers; among others, see the All India Congress Committee (AICC), II installment/S.3765/PGC 3(A); AICC II installment/S.3763/PGC 2; AICC II installment/3764(ii), 1955, PGC.

⁴ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 85/1008 (1944).

⁵ “Proceedings of the Indian Round Table Conference (12 Nov 1930–19 Jan 1931), Report of Sub-committee on Series No. 8 (London, 1931), 67.

⁶ Haig to Linlithgow, 5 August 1937, MSS.EUR.F. 125/126, in Carter (2008, pp. 189–190); Haig to Linlithgow, 16 August 1937, MSS.EUR.F. 125/126, *ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷ Haig to Linlithgow, 22 September 1937, R/3/1/2, 250–51.

⁸ Haig to Linlithgow, 21 April 1938, R/3/1/73, in Carter (2009, pp. 144–145).

⁹ Haig to Linlithgow, 8 November 1937, R/3/1/2, in Carter (2008, p. 297); Haig to Linlithgow, 9 February 1938, R/3/1/73, in Carter (2009, pp. 75–79).

¹⁰ Linlithgow to Haig, 15 November 1937, R/3/1/2, in Carter (2008, p. 387–389).

¹¹ Indeed, only years prior to the transfer of power in 1947, the British administration failed to deal at all with famine conditions in Bengal, leading to the deaths of an estimated three million Indians.

¹² Author's calculations.

¹³ Compiled from Annual Lists of the Indian Civil Service.

¹⁴ NAI/MHA/3/20/48-GS.

¹⁵ NAI/MHA/15/16/49-Ests.

¹⁶ "Letter from Masurkar to Patel" 20 Aug 1947, in Das (1973, p. 345).

¹⁷ Report on the Events in Bihar during the First half of July 1945, NAI; Report on the Events in Bihar during the Second Half of September, 1945, NAI.

¹⁸ NAI/MHA/3/4/48-Ests, NAI/MHA/424/45-Ests.

¹⁹ "Question in Parliament by Sri Sharan Jain about no of Class I & II officers in Govt. depts.," NAI/MHA/ 40/16/50-CS.

²⁰ NAI/MHA/130/48-GS.

²¹ Nehru (1975, p. 53) explained as much in a public lecture in 1955: "too much continuity will become static, will become weak and there will be no progress. [Similarly], too much change may shake up and break up the structure completely and then you have to pick up the threads of continuity again . . . one has to balance change and continuity."

²² NAI/MHA/3/20/48-GS.

²³ For example, the Excise Dept. cut from betel nut coffee and tea: 3 clerks, 32 III grade preventative officers, and 32 II grade guards; the Administrative Secretariat culled: 9 sub-inspectors, 66 III grade preventative officers, and 66 II grade guards. The Control section axed 1 assistant excise commissioner, and 2 clerks. The Forest Dept. cut considerably, including the entire staff of the High Range Division and the Perunchaani Forest Division. In the electrical dept. 2 executive engineers, 2 assistant engineers, and 68 other support staff

were eliminated. From the High Court, 1 High Court Judge and 1 temporary second Judge were abolished. From the income tax dept. 5 staff eliminated and the rest transferred to Revenue Dept. Public Health also eliminated some temporary staff, amounting to a 3.13% of total expenditure. Reductions were made in Industries Dept. including an industrial engineer, plus 3 others. The Ayurveda Dept. retired 6. Transport reduced pay and abolished approximately 50 other posts. Geological Dept. eliminated 3. The Anchal Dept. also eliminated 3 savings bank inspectors and their staff. In Fisheries a number of supervisors were abolished. PSC retired 3 clerical staff. Regional employment office also got rid of a handful of clerical staff. Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 201/D.Dis.292 (1948).

²⁴ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 123/3236 (1944), 2nd document: "Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 11 March 1944, Proceedings of Government of His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore, Order R. Ris. No. 157/44/C.S., Dated Trivandrum 11 march 1944."

²⁵ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 257/10409 (1949); Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 204/4755/D/Dis2/49/cs (1949).

²⁶ Travancore Government Gazette, Vol LXXIII, Trivandrum, Tuesday, 18th February 1936 (No.27), Public Service Department, "Travancore Public Service Recruitment Rules" 1111.

²⁷ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section/123/3236 (1944).

²⁸ "Absorption of Baroda state servants consequent on merger with Bombay," NAI/ Political Dept./751.F.61-P/49/Vol. 1 & 2.

²⁹ NAI/Political Dept./42.F.1/30/P/47; Kerala State Archives/General Section/214/219 (1925).

³⁰ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section/85/2886/1047 (1944).

³¹ In this interpretation, I differ with Manali Desai (2006) who argues that civil society and the politics associated with it were the main source of difference between the two states.

³² “Absorption of state services,” NAI/ Political Dept./655.F.395-P/48; “Question re absorption of lower grades in Orissa service,” NAI/290.F.12/70/P/48; “Re: absorption of Deccan State servants,” NAI/Political Dept./208.F.9/93/P/48.

³³ “Letter from V. P. Menon to P. S. Rao, ICS, Regional Commissioner, Indore,” 21 Sept 1949, NAI/ Political Dept./139.F.2/62/P/49; “Legislative Assembly Question re: State administrations taken into the Union” NAI/ Political Dept./249.F.12/22/P/48.

³⁴ Kerala State Archives/Confidential Section/326/Fn. 820/1950.

³⁵ Kerala State Archives/Confidential Section/318/Fn. 12077/1949.

³⁶ Kerala State Archives, Confidential Section, 85/1008/1944.

³⁷ Compiled from Annual Lists of the Indian Civil Service.

³⁸ NAI/MHA/3/20/48-GS.