
IMPERIAL AUTHORITY AND MAGNIFICENCE:
DELHI DARBAR 1877, 1903, 1911

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Early twentieth century saw literary, cultural and political changes. There were political and cultural movements which defined the British policies and British politics. The British were adhering to imperial agenda. Francis Hutchins attributed origin of imperial ideology after 1857. He contends, ‘the changed connotation of such a term Empire in the second half of nineteenth century was new,’ and the ‘secure and the relatively peaceful military control of the half century following the Mutiny gave the idea much more substance.’¹ After the Mutiny, the British became more vigilant, restructured the Army to prevent other rebellion. In this context, strength of British troops was raised to 80,000 of which 50,000 were for Bengal, 15,000 for Madras, and 15,000 for Bombay². They were also given total control over artillery and some other branches of the Army. Spear considers the post-mutiny period as an era of ‘modernized India’.³

The British driven by imperial agenda continued to consolidate British Empire by introducing various political and economic measures. The ideology of civilizing ‘the primitive other’ offered them principles which shaped their literary, cultural and textual interventions. In his pioneering book *Orientalism*, Edward Said has shown that the textual production by the western authors, imperial administrators, travelers, novelists, archeologists, economists, political theorists, poets has always shown the ‘Orient’ as the ‘primitive ‘uncivilized’ and ‘irrational’ in contrast to the ‘developed’, ‘rational’ and ‘scientific Europe’⁴ but contrary to their beliefs and textual reproduction of the British in India appropriated eastern symbols, incorporated pictorial representational iconic visual sights to assert their authority and control over Indian nobility and native populace.

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¹ Hutchins, Francis, *The illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) p. XI.

² Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi ‘PUNJABISATION’ IN THE BRITISH INDIAN ARMY 1857-1947 AND THE ADVENT OF MILITARY RULE IN PAKISTAN” *Edinburgh Papers In South Asian Studies* Number 24 (2010) p.5.

³ Spear, Percival, *Modern India London* (Oxford University Press, 1964) p.230.

⁴ Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

This paper focuses on the magnificence, extravagant organization of *Darbars* as state symbol which formed key elements in ‘cultural appropriation’. By borrowing, re-interpreting and imitating cultural symbols, the imperial ideology and influence was being re-imagined and re-constructed after the Mutiny representing single unifying power ruling over India and Indians.

After the mutiny, the Crown took over the authority of the Government of India from the East India Company. After 1857, Canning toured the Country, held *Darbars*, distributed titles and rewards. These representational acts were intended to shape the sensibilities of the natives of towards the British Empire. The Prime Minister of England, Benjamin Disraeli declared Queen Victoria as the Empress of India. The Royal title Bill was introduced in the Parliament on 9th March 1876 to declare Queen Victoria as the Empress of India. Lord Canning, the last Governor General of India, took over as the first viceroy of India. Holding of *Darbars* was an innate traditional custom of Eastern rulers. Through the ceremony a message of order, authority and control used to be conveyed to the populace.

Viceroy Lytton, who convened the 1877 *Darbar*, understood the essential purpose of this Indian spectacle: ‘The decorative details of an Indian pageant are like those parts of an animal which are no use at all for butcher’s meat, and even unfit for scientific dissection, but from which augers draw the omens that move armies and influence Princes.’⁵

During the course of their consolidation of Empire, their political and social ideology had distanced itself from the ‘Oriental’ symbols which denoted Eastern grandeur, lethargy and triviality. The East constituted ‘the other’. But Cohen points out that the British in India adopted indigenous social symbols, rituals, images which transformed their representational images by appropriating the practice of holding *Darbars*.⁶ The coronation ceremony of the British Monarch as the Emperor and Empress of India symbolized their authority, dominance and racial superiority. These ceremonies were celebrated with huge pomp and show for their assertion as a ruling class. *Darbars* were held in the Coronation Park, Delhi, to mark the succession of Queen Victoria in 1877, Edward VII in 1903 and George V in 1911. According to Codell ‘these massive events held in Delhi lasted from two to four weeks and required months of strenuous preparations. Event included homage by maharajas to British

⁵ Henton, Alexandra, “In 1911 Delhi Durbar: A remarkable Spectacle” *The Field*, November 17, 2011.

⁶ Cohen, Bernard, “Representing Authority in Victorian India” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds; *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Monarch, military reviews, musical performances, lavish banquets, and sporting events, and public entertainments, exhibition of Indian art, receptions and garden parties. Considered the archetypal Victorian invented tradition, these Durbars were creation of the viceroys of India-Robert Lytton (active 1876-80), George Curzon (active 1899-1905) and Charles Hardinge (active 1910-16). Each durbar expressed Imperial policies and combined three ceremonies: the Indian durbar, the British coronation and procession that resonated with political and religious life in both countries.⁷

The *Darbar* in Delhi was held on January 1, 1877. A public holiday was declared, and about one lakh people arrived in Delhi. Between 1858 and 1877, maharajas loyal to Britain in 1857-58 were hierarchically re-classified in a formal vassalage to the British monarch and given appropriate numbers of gun salutes up to 21. In the 1877 durbar, maharajas were placed at the receiving end of the ceremonies, precisely where their own subjects would have been in traditional durbars.⁸ The correspondent of *The Times of India* noted the scale of magnificence. He reported, ‘it would be difficult for even an Oriental mind to imagine a scene of such grandeur and splendour as that witnessed from the Imperial dais this morning. It is doubtful whether any country or any age has ever known so magnificent a spectacle. The Imperial dais itself and the stands which surrounded it are gorgeous to an extreme. Dias is hardly a word for it. It is a throne standing on a hexagonal pedestal beneath a canopy which is surrounded by an Imperial crown.⁹ The salutation to Queen Victoria was hundred and one guns, for the Viceroy of India it was 31 guns and other chiefs on the basis of their relationship with the British were accorded salute of 21, 19,17,15,11 and 9. Lord Lytton read out to the guests and the people of India the telegraphic message of Queen Victoria, condescendingly seeking close cooperation between the ruling race and the ‘subjects’. The Royals were touched by the evidence of their (native) loyalty to (our) throne and house¹⁰. The Queen as an Empress was proclaimed Kesar-I- Hind. The ceremony was also marked by the release of 15,988 prisoners on the basis of good conduct.¹¹ The grandiose ceremony was followed by a display of fireworks for over two hours in the evening.¹² The ceremonies including ritualistic, cultural and military

⁷ Codell, Julie, “On The Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911” Branch: Briton, Representation and Nineteenth Century History available at <https://www.navsa.org/2013/02/06/branch-britain-representation-and-nineteenth-century-history-1775-1925-4/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ ‘The Proclamation of Queen Victoria as “Empress of India”’ *Times of India* dated 6.02.1887.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

festivities unfolded in the following days displayed colossal display of British Empire's organizational might and conceit. The Assemblage set the precedent for the subsequent Viceroys to hold Durbars in India following coronation of British Monarchs in England. Lord Lytton representing the Queen Victoria showed his own authority by displaying extravagantly Eastern symbols and presiding over the lavish festivities before the native nobility, soldiers and the people.

In England the British monarchy was resurrected from its precarious and unpopular state through 'invented traditions.' David Cannadine studies the process of a 'coherent syntax and language of symbols and meanings' which constructed the personae of the British monarch Queen Victoria in public imagination and in the colonies. 'The deliberate ceremonial presentation of an important but venerated monarch as a unifying symbol of permanence and national community became both possible and necessary.'¹³ On behalf of the government of India, Lytton Commissioned Val Prinsep to paint the Imperial Assemblage as a gift for the Queen. In addition to his fare and stay in India he was offered \$5000. For the picture too, the native Princes had contributed.¹⁴ The Princes were happy as they had to sponsor the event and not too long before they had earlier hosted Prince of Wales in India¹⁵.

The *second Darbar* was held in Delhi in 1903 after Edward VII to mark the declaration of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra as Emperor and Empress of India. Lord Curzon praised Lord Lytton for conceptualizing and organizing Delhi *Darbar* in 1877. In the Imperial Legislative Council at Simla on September 5, 1902, Curzon said, 'To my mind, Lord Lytton, who was the first in British times to inaugurate such an Imperial Durbar as we propose to hold, though in different circumstances and on a smaller scale, set an example characterised both by statesmanship and imagination. I have not a doubt that much good flowed from the Imperial Assemblage of 1st January 1877, and, under the blessing of Providence, I firmly believe that (s) similar aid even larger result(s) will follow from the ceremony of the 1st January 1903.'¹⁶ What followed was 'The spectacular pageantry unfolded during the two weeks festivities In a few short months at the end of 1902, a deserted plain was transformed

¹³Cannadine, David, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Rituals: The British Monarchy And The "Invention of Tradition '1820-1971' in Hobswam and Rangers (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) p.133.

¹⁴ Cohen p.193.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Caldwell H. Lipsett, *Lord Curzon in India: 1898-1903 (1903)* (R.A .Everett & Sons 1903) available at <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/afghanuno/2/>.

into an elaborate tented city, complete with temporary light railway to bring crowds of spectators out from Delhi, a post office with its own stamp, telephone and telegraphic facilities, a variety of stores, a Police force with specially designed uniform, hospital, magistrate's court and complex sanitation, drainage and electric light installations.¹⁷

King Edward VII was represented by his brother, the Duke of Connaught. He attended the second *Darbar*, 'in a military uniform, wearing robe and insignia of the Order, and attended by the little Raja Sahib of Dholpur and the son of Thakur of Dilwara who attended as pages.'¹⁸ The Royals, the Viceroy rode through the Delhi streets on richly dressed elephants, escorted by mounted soldiers. The magnificent function was organized by Sir Hugh Barnes. During the *Darbar* ceremony as the viceroy went up the dais, the bands played the National Anthem, and the Grand Master seated himself upon his throne, was magnificent¹⁹. The festivities continued for two weeks included dances, sports, military review, bands etc. In 1903 and 1911, receptions were held in the Diwan-i-Am, the Public room, and the Diwan-i-Khas, the Private Audience room, of the Mughal Red Fort. Curzon had these restored and fitted with electric lights for his *darbar*²⁰

¹⁷Burke, G Wade, "The Circus 'no Spin Zone' Delhi Durbar 1903" available at <http://circusnospin.blogspot.com/2009/03/delhi-darbar-1903-lord-curzon-producer.html>.

¹⁸ Fraser, Loveat, *At Delhi* (Bombay, 1903) p.121.

¹⁹ *Id.* p.122.

²⁰ Codell.

The *Third Darbar* was held on 12th December, 1911, following the coronation of George V in London on 22nd June 1911 as a king and Mary as a queen of the United Kingdom and British Empire. The Royal Proclamation proclaimed that the 'Imperial Assemblage' would be held at Delhi' in December 1911. *The entire arrangement was meticulously planned and outlined in the Official Directory in India with maps and intended programme.* Kaul writes that 'the Durbar had preoccupied India for more than a year, involved the most elaborate preparations and much expense'²¹.

King George V and Queen Mary had earlier toured India as Prince and Princess of Wales during 1905-6. The Garrads & Co, Crown Jewelers were commissioned to design a new crown for the monarch to attend the Delhi *Durbar*. The new crown with eight arches containing 6,170 cut diamonds and covered with sapphires, emeralds and rubies was crafted²².

In 1911, The King and the Queen travelled to India to attend the huge gathering of great magnificence where British officials, native nobility paid homage to the British Monarch. Earlier Viceroy Harding had written to the Secretary to the King that only 21-gun Chiefs (native princes selected on priority) should be invited by the Government to sit down, always on a lower level, and not alongside (the Monarch). The other Chiefs should all remain standing in the presence of the King while his Majesty sits.' So were the camps of British officials and native princes were pitched in on the basis of their relationship with the British Government. Miffed Gaekwad broke the protocol, 'bowed once, partly before turning around and walking away. Unlike others before him, the Gaekwad's homage smacked of arrogance in the eyes of the colonial masters. Gaekwad told Motilal Nehru it would have been all right if we had not to act in it like animals in a circus'.²³ Codell observes that the 'The Red Fort became the royal seat where the king and queen revived the custom of darshan, i.e., appearing on the fort balcony in full regalia and robes to share their aura, and as 'they left their thrones under the shamiana, many Indians rushed from the amphitheater to kiss the thrones and the ground on which the royals had stood, carrying out a mass puja, or worship'. Valentine Chirol had earlier observed that 'for it was the first time that the Sovereign to whom it was given to rule over India from a remote Western island travelled out to receive on Indian soil the homage of his Indian subjects and appeared before them in the full majesty of crown,

²¹ Kaul, Chandrika, *Media and the Imperial Experiences; Britain and India in twentieth century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.19.

²² Royal Trust Collection via internet.

²³ *India Today* New Delhi December 11, 2011.

orb, and sceptre'²⁴. *In the Darbar, the king announced transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi and revoked Curzon's decision of Partition of Bengal though territories comprised in the two Bengals were redistributed.*

*Media played an extraordinary role in disseminating and popularizing the British Indian splendor of Darbars. Painters, journalists, poets, novelists were commissioned and invited formally. Kaul studies the various forms of communication employed to propagate the scale of magnificence and authority of the Imperial ideology and British Empire. 'The Durbar was covered by every form of extant popular media, including newspapers, newsreels and the cinematograph, lantern slide shows, musical theatre and operatic compositions, paintings, photography, pamphlets and books. It effectively became a one-event money spinner for the media as most graphically displayed by the popularity of the newsreels and film footage produced by companies like Kinemacolor, Pathé and Gaumont.'*²⁵ Raghu karnad rightly observes that 'the scale of the Durbar would be difficult to believe if it hadn't been thoroughly filmed and photographed'²⁶

The *Darbars* displayed the British as the rightful guardian, ruling class driven by racial and imperial ideology. The dazzling extravagant event also defined the relationship of native nobility with British Government. The Viceroy's position was defined in their regalia as directly representing the Monarchy. Therefore, dazzling *Darbars* symbolized political and imperial messages.

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²⁴ Sir Chirol, Valentine. India, Old and New April 8, 2005, The Project Gutenberg.

²⁵ Kaul p.20.

²⁶ Karnad, Raghu TBIP2011.

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