



THE STORY OF THE DILLI DURBAR OF 1911

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ABSTRACT

The Delhi Durbar of 1911 represents a pivotal moment in the annals of British India, epitomizing the zenith of imperial authority and showcasing the opulence and splendor of the British Raj. Hosted in Delhi, the capital of British India, this grand event served as a platform for King George V, the British monarch, to assert his dominion and consolidate control over the subcontinent. This paper extensively examines the significance of the Delhi Durbar of 1911 in the context of both Indian history and the evolution of Delhi, delving into its historical backdrop, the motives driving its organization, its ceremonial intricacies, and its enduring impact on the Indian nationalist movement. The Delhi Durbar of 1911 emerges as a potent emblem of fortitude, defiance, and the unyielding determination of a populace striving for emancipation. It can be asserted that this event remains a watershed moment not only in the narrative of British India, signifying the pinnacle of imperial dominance and providing insight into the intricate interplay between the colonizers and the colonized, but also in the history of Delhi itself, influencing its urban, demographic, and architectural evolution in significant ways. This paper endeavours to establish the Delhi Durbar of 1911 as a crucial focal point for the examination of Delhi's role first as the capital of the British Empire and subsequently as the capital of independent India. The carefully curated Bibliography presented in this paper serves as a valuable resource for scholars and enthusiasts of Delhi, offering a means to consolidate dispersed knowledge about this momentous event and accord it its rightful place in the layered history of Delhi as both an imperial and national capital.

KEYWORDS: Dilli/ Delhi Darbar, Imperial Capital, National Capital, 1911, Delhi

INTRODUCTION

The Delhi Durbar of 1911 holds immense importance in the history of British India, representing the peak of imperial dominance and displaying the magnificence of the British Raj. Situated in Delhi, the capital of British India, the Durbar provided a stage for King

George V, the British monarch, to affirm his supremacy and strengthen imperial rule over the subcontinent. This paper delves into the significance of the 1911 Delhi Durbar, examining its historical context, the motives behind its organization, its ceremonial elements, and its enduring impact on the Indian nationalist movement. It also emphasizes the limited awareness surrounding this event, despite its pivotal role in the nationalist and urban narratives of both the nation and the city. Some remnants of the 1911 Delhi Durbar still exist in Delhi, alongside numerous other sources that offer glimpses into this historical event. The paper compiles a curated bibliography of these archival materials, providing a resource for enthusiasts of Delhi to delve deeper into the importance and nature of the Delhi Durbar of 1911. To grasp the full significance of the Delhi Durbar of 1911, it is crucial to consider the broader historical backdrop in which it took place. By the early 20th century, British colonial authority in India had become firmly entrenched, and the British sought to strengthen their dominion through various means. The Durbar, originally a customary court ceremony, was adapted by the British as a platform to showcase the grandeur of the empire and establish the image of the British monarch as the ruler of India.

The Beginning: The Darbars of 1877 and 1903

The Coronation Assemblies of 1877, 1903, and 1911 had a profound impact on the demographics and layout of Delhi. The 1877 Assembly was conceived by Viceroy Lytton, a favored poet of Queen Victoria. He envisioned a grand spectacle to mark the direct authority of the crown over Indian territories. The term 'Darbar' itself conveyed the organizers' foresight, recognizing that the traditional Indian display of power through lavish ceremonies and grandeur would have a significant impact on the Indian psyche. Thus, a large gathering of 400 Indian princes took place on a field near the Burari village. Around 68,000 participants were accommodated in temporary camps set up around Delhi. Spanning the first two weeks of the year and lasting for 14 days, this grand event costed Rs. 60 lakhs. While it successfully intimidated Indians with the might of the empire, it was criticized by the residents

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of Delhi who were struggling to save the esteemed Delhi College. They petitioned the government for aid, which was denied, while this extravagant event was approved (Gupta, 1998, p.106).

The subsequent Assembly was organized by Viceroy Curzon to celebrate Edward VII's ascension to the throne in 1901, aiming to showcase the empire's power once again and suppress the initial spark of Indian nationalism. Delhi was once again chosen as the venue due to its geographical and political distance from the turmoil in Bengal. The procession, commencing on January 1, 1903, was even more magnificent with the added convenience of railways and other modern advancements. In addition to Indian royalty, representatives from other Asian colonies also participated. Edward VII was represented by his brother and sister-in-law, the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, along with many dignitaries from Britain. On December 29, Lord Curzon made a grand entrance in full regalia, and the following day, he

arrived at the Darbar site in a procession through the streets of Shahjahanabad, riding on a decorated elephant. The event included an investiture ceremony, a state ball, sports tournaments, art exhibitions, tours of historical sites, and displays of native culture, all adding to the lavish celebration. However, the 1911 Darbar was taken several notches higher and therefore marked the pinnacle of imperial power, due to the presence of the Emperor and Empress, George V and his consort Queen Mary.

The Great Climax: The Darbar of 1911

This marked the inaugural visit of a British monarch to India. The Delhi Darbar of 1911 was organized to commemorate the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary as Emperor and Empress of India in 1910. In February 1911, George V stirred a sensation with his first speech in Parliament, expressing his desire to visit India (Raman and Agarwal, 2012). Having visited India in 1906 as the crown prince, the Regent's interest in the country was piqued, and this was complemented by a self-congratulatory mood among the British after the division of the Indian National Congress in 1907, the segregation of Hindu and Muslim electorates through Morley-Minto reforms in 1909, and the resolution of the partition of Bengal by 1910 (Frykenberg, 1986, 2002).

Preparations for the Delhi Darbar of 1911 entailed extensive renovation of the city, including the construction of new infrastructure. This included roads, bridges, and buildings, along with the creation of an elaborate imperial pavilion for the coronation ceremony. The Darbar brought together Indian princes and rulers from all principalities, with Viceroy Lord Hardinge and other British officials in full attendance. Its purpose was to leave a significant impact on the British administration in India, showcasing the power and prestige of the British Raj, and reinforcing the loyalty of Indian princes and rulers to the British Crown. It aimed to forge stronger bonds between British and Indian rulers, foster the concept of a unified India, and instill a sense of unity and pride among Indian subjects, eliciting loyalty to the British cause.

On December 11, 1911, the royal couple arrived in Delhi to a grand procession. This event featured a splendid procession of the royal family and dignitaries, an impressive military parade, a lavish banquet, a breathtaking fireworks display, an elaborate cultural program, including music, dance, and theatrical performances, and an extensive exhibition of Indian arts and crafts. On December 12, 1911, the royal couple participated in the Darbar, where Indian princes and rulers presented gifts and bestowed a gold key to the city of Delhi. The Darbar culminated with a magnificent fireworks display. On December 13, 1911, the royal couple returned to England.

Unlike its predecessors, the 1911 Coronation Darbar was graced by the presence of the King himself and was consequently extraordinarily costly. A new 'India' crown was crafted for George V, as his Christian coronation piece was unsuitable for a non-Christian ceremony. The expenses were covered by the Indian treasury. The construction of a temporary tented city, spanning 45 square miles, and other monumental undertakings raised the total cost to 900,000 pounds sterling. Lord Hardinge established a Darbar Committee, led by Sir John Hewett, Lieutenant Governor of the United Provinces, which selected a large field for the Darbar premises, necessitating the evacuation of six villages as per the King's

directive to hold the Darbar in an open area for mass participation. This field ultimately hosted an integrated city with all necessary amenities and access points. It featured two amphitheatres - a covered, smaller one for paying tributes, and a larger open one with a capacity for 100,000 attendees. At its centre stood a stage with thrones under a golden dome visible from many miles away. The Indo-Saracenic style of architecture was favoured, and provisions were made to respect Indian customs, such as purdah for women. The Royal Camp consisted of 2000 tents, including the Reception Tent, the Royal Suite, the Kingsway, and official camps. The Darbar Camp included 475 well-appointed camps for governors, officers, and royal guests. Railways played a crucial role in transporting people and resources. Delhi Station was expanded with 11 new platforms, and two new stations were built at Azadpur and Sabzi Mandi. Within the Darbar site, 29 railway stations and a temporary nodal Station with six platforms operated full time. The high volume of traffic before and during the Darbar led to the laying of new lines, introduction of special trains, and rerouting. A 'Light Railway' starting from Tis Hazari provided inner connectivity in the Darbar area. Technological advancements also included a Coronation Post Office near the present-day Oberoi Maidens Hotel, complete with telephone, telegraph, and postal services. With 50,000 army personnel on duty, the canvas city with its myriad support systems was swiftly erected.

The opening day of the Darbar was declared a public holiday, drawing crowds to line the processional path throughout the night of December 6, 1911. The route extended from Delhi Gate, Queen's Road, Khas Bazar, Dufferin's Bridge, Jama Masjid, Mori Gate, Chandni Chawk, Rajpur Road, Fatehpur Bazaar, to Chauburja Road, concluding at the Darbar complex at the Ridge. The King chose to ride a horse, attired in a Field Marshall's red uniform, instead of an elephant. The Indian princely contingent compensated

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for this restraint by adorning themselves in elaborate native attire. The Royal couple engaged in various cultural, sports, and sightseeing activities at the Darbar, also partaking in social, ceremonial, and religious duties. The centerpiece, the Coronation Darbar ceremony on December 12, 1911, was a splendid formal spectacle that not only achieved its intended purpose - showcasing the empire's grandeur and reinforcing the authority of the British monarch over Indian subjects - but also delivered a tremendous 'capital surprise.'

A Beginning and an End

During an unexpected deviation from their planned schedule on the morning of December 15, George V disclosed the previously guarded plan to relocate the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Accompanied by the Queen, he laid the foundation stones for the new capital at the Government of India camp, which is now the location of Kingsway Camp. These stones were subsequently moved to the North and South blocks in 1915, where they remain to this day. The proposal was initially put forth by 'Member Home', John Lewis Jenkins, who described it as a "bold stroke of statesmanship." This move was intended not only to resolve the contentious issue surrounding Bengal's partition but also to diminish its political and economic importance. (Sengupta, 2007, p. 25) It was crucial for the British to curb the burgeoning nationalist sentiment among the Bengal Bhadrlok while simultaneously redirecting the focus of imperialism to a new and stable territory. Although the political and

financial implications of relocating the capital were fiercely debated within the higher echelons of the Government of India, it ultimately proceeded in deference to the King's resolve to undo the partition of Bengal and bestow a memorable gift upon the people of India during his visit. According to Frykenberg: Of one thing there can be no doubt. The decision to move the seat of Supreme Government from Calcutta was intimately linked both to the partition of Bengal and its revocation. ... If, in vivid expressions of imperial grandeur, pageantry, and power, some saw it as the ultimate high noon of British arrogance and pomp, there were others who saw it as a more pathetic and pettier spectacle, and a harbinger of dire events. ... It signalled, in other words, an eventual ending both of British and Bengali hegemony in India. (Frykenberg, 1986, 2002, p. 226)

Imperialist figures such as Sir Guy Fleetwood Wilson, Member Finance; Lord Crewe, Secretary of State in London; and Lord Hardinge, Viceroy, supported this concept. The intended purpose of this grand capital was clear. It served as a tool of colonial authority, strategically designed in political, architectural, and spatial terms to subdue the colony into submission. Additionally, it provided a rationale for the substantial expenditures on the Darbar and allowed the King to make sensational headlines. History ultimately views this extravagant event as a desperate and illusory ploy by a declining empire, which is not entirely unjustified. Just 16 years after the inauguration of New Delhi in 1931, the British withdrew from India in 1947. The Darbar of 1911 not only led to the creation of the temporary capital but also shaped the New Delhi we know today. An additional 500 acres were annexed to the existing Civil Lines, forming the 'Notified Area', which served as the Temporary Capital until 1922. This endeavor gave rise to the Viceregal Lodge (now part of Delhi University), Secretary's office (presently 5, Shammath Marg), the Commander-in-Chief's office (later housing Indraprastha College since 1932), and the Assembly House (now the Old Secretariat) (Mittal, 2018, p. 739). The construction of New Delhi entailed an enormous expenditure of Rs.115 million. The ideology behind the Darbar significantly influenced the construction of New Delhi. The deliberate incorporation of elevated structures, precise symmetry, wide and straight thoroughfares, grand processional routes, triumphal arches, columns, and ramps all reinforced the principle of power deeply embedded in its architecture. These elements exemplified the ordered solemnity and dignity of the Western style, presenting it as the natural regulator over the perceived disorder and insignificance of the native population, as noted by Ranjana Sengupta.

Not coincidentally, hierarchies such as these, expressed in spatial terms are found in Hanoi, built by the French, Manila, built by the Americans, and in Lusaka, built by the British. Allocations by minutely specified gradation are a common feature of all colonial cities. New Delhi, however, refines the distinction of race and rank to an unprecedented degree. The address not only conveyed professional status, but also the size of the house and garden, width of the road and whether the official was British or Indian. (Sengupta, 2007, p. 34)

The Story of the Story

In Ahmed Ali's "Twilight in Delhi," he chronicles life in Delhi during the 1910s, just prior to the commencement of the ambitious project to build New Delhi. The Darbar of 1911 symbolizes the impermanence and pointlessness of the world (Ali, 1940, p. 150). Mirza

Nasirul Mulk, the youngest son of the last Mughal emperor Bahadurshah Zafar, wanders the streets of Shahjahanabad in the guise of a beggar, witnessing the replacement of the old with the new. Through the protagonist, Mir Nahal, it evokes the trauma and resentment of the events of 1857, the emerging sense of nationalism among discontented Indians, and their simultaneous submission to the ascendant and uncompromising British power. Onlookers both reject the man in the plain military red uniform riding a horse as their King and deride the customs of the indigenous chiefs. This renders both the former royalty and the white regime as cultural and political outsiders to the common people. They both ridicule and take a sort of perverse pleasure in the peculiar procession, knowing that none of it truly alleviates the hardships of their everyday lives. Consequently, the extravagance of the Darbar not only reflects the despondency and powerlessness of the native population in 1911 but also their determination to someday "show courage" and expel the foreigners from India, as "those are the people who have been our undoing" (Ali, 1940, p. 148).

CONCLUSION

The Delhi Durbar of 1911 had a profound impact on the Indian nationalist movement, unintentionally affecting the British Empire as well. The grand display of imperial power and the British dominance of the event acted as a catalyst for Indian political awareness and anti-colonial sentiments. Many Indian nationalists saw the Durbar as a Symbol of British oppression and cultural dominance, strengthening their determination to pursue independence. The Durbar also revealed the deep-seated dissatisfaction among Indians regarding their limited involvement and representation in the imperial administration. Consequently, the event played a crucial role in rallying Indians towards a unified struggle for self-governance. Its historical background, motives, ceremonial aspects, and influence on the Indian nationalist movement illustrate the multifaceted nature of this significant occasion. While the Durbar aimed to showcase British authority and grandeur, it inadvertently kindled the flames of Indian nationalism, ultimately contributing to the dissolution of the British Empire in the region.

The Delhi Durbar of 1911 serves as a powerful symbol of resistance, endurance, and the unwavering spirit of a people striving for freedom. It can be argued that the Delhi Durbar of 1911 remains a pivotal moment not only in the history of British India, representing the pinnacle of imperial power and offering insight into the intricate dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized, but also in the history of Delhi itself, shaping its urban, demographic, and architectural development in significant ways. This paper aims to establish the Delhi Durbar of 1911 as a crucial focal point for studying Delhi first as the capital of the British empire and later as the capital of independent India. The select bibliography that follows serves as a resource to assist Delhi researchers or enthusiasts in consolidating scattered knowledge about this momentous event and to rightfully acknowledge its place in the layered history of Delhi as both an imperial and national capital.

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4. **Museums:** To gain insight into the Delhi Durbar of 1911, there are several museums and institutions in Delhi that offer a wealth of information. These venues often feature displays, artifacts, images, and other items associated with the event. Below are some of the museums in Delhi where you can delve into the history of the Delhi Durbar:
 - National Museum, New Delhi: The National Museum boasts an extensive collection of artifacts, including significant items linked to the Delhi Durbar. It includes a dedicated gallery showcasing various objects from the Durbar, such as attire, photographs, mementos, and official records.
 - Indian War Memorial Museum: Situated at the Red Fort in Delhi, the Indian War Memorial Museum provides a glimpse into the history of the Indian armed forces. It houses a section exclusively dedicated to the Delhi Durbar, exhibiting photographs, uniforms, medals, and other keepsakes.
 - Nehru Memorial Museum and Library: Located at Teen Murti Bhavan, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library offers a range of resources and archival materials covering various facets of Indian history. It possesses a collection of documents, photographs, and manuscripts associated with the Delhi Durbar.
 5. **Places:** Delhi hosts several sites that hold significance in connection to the Delhi Durbar of 1911. These places offer insights into the historical importance of the event, even if some have undergone changes over time. They retain their cultural and historical value associated with the grand Durbar. Here are some noteworthy locations linked to the occasion: