

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 32-33



The Delhi Durbar, 1911  
Last Hurrah of the Raj

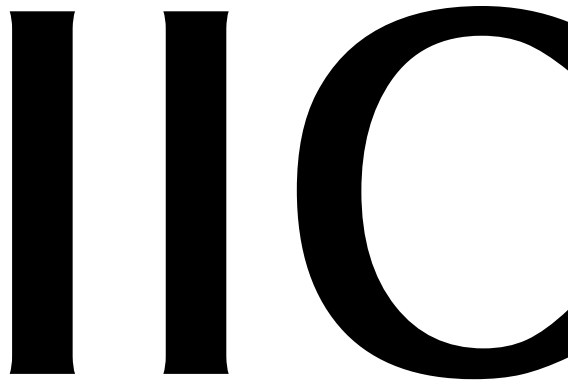
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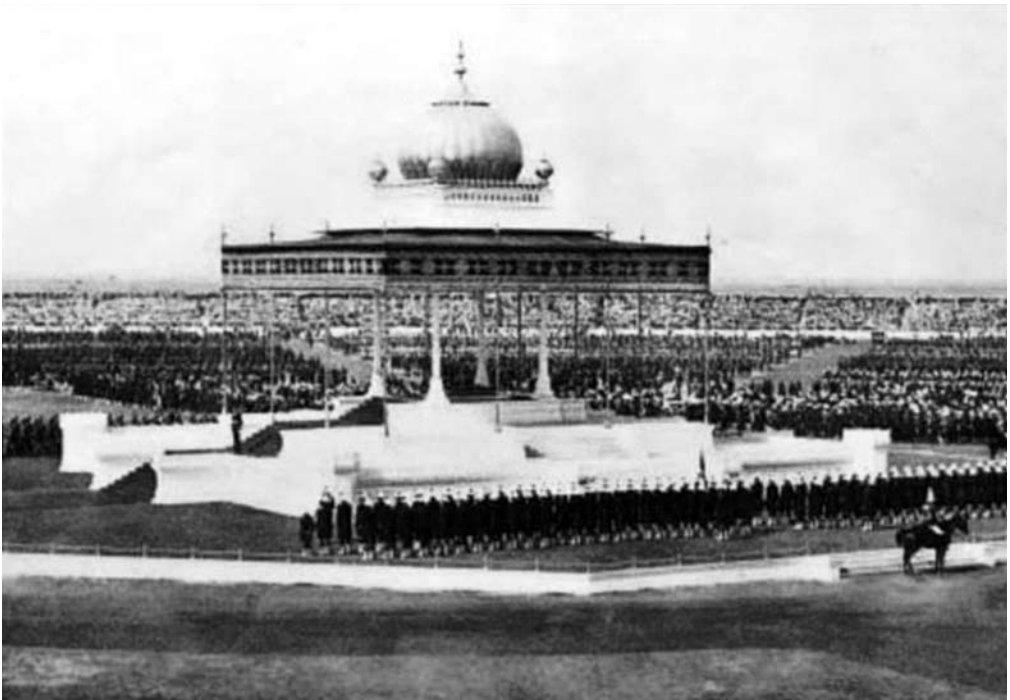
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# The Delhi Durbar, 1911 Last Hurrah of the Raj



*The Grand Amphitheatre specially made for the Durbar of 1911, proclaiming an Empire at High Noon*

Exactly one hundred years ago, Delhi was witness to a dazzling spectacle — an Imperial Durbar, the magnificence of which the world had rarely seen. It was held in what is now known as Coronation Park in North Delhi. The occasion was to celebrate the visit to India and the coronation of the King Emperor George V and his consort, whose empire stretched across five continents. The Durbar was a grandiloquent gesture to proclaim the power and panoply of a Raj at High Noon.



*King George V & Queen Mary, 1911; 'It was entirely my own idea to hold the Coronation Durbar at Delhi in person', the King said.*

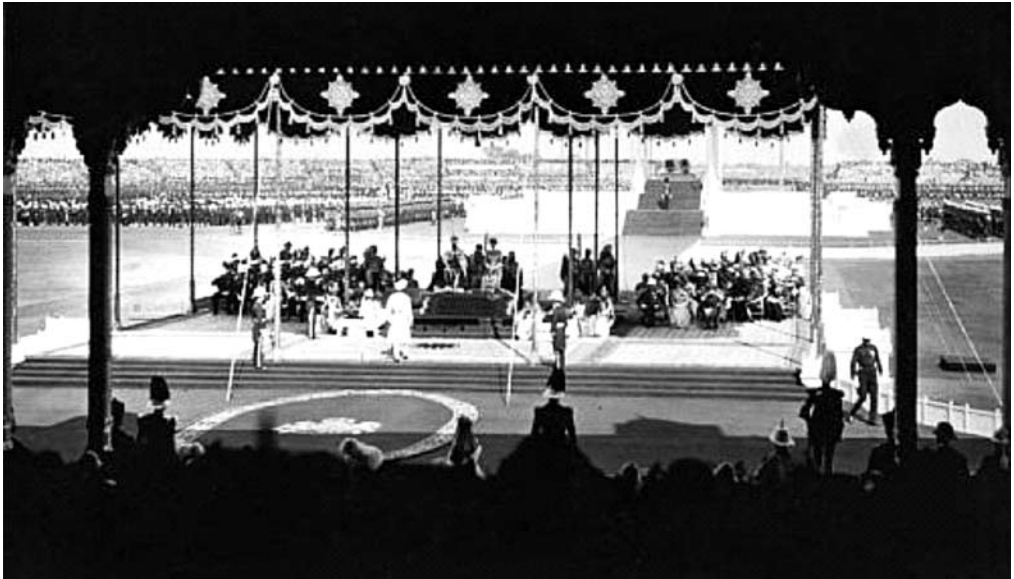
As Prince of Wales, the King had first visited India with his consort in December 1905 as guests of the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, and, captivated by India's charms, had always wanted to return. Three Durbars were held at the height of the British Empire between 1877 and 1911. But King George V was the only British monarch to preside over his Durbar. Neither his grandmother Queen Victoria, nor his father Edward VII, were able to come to India for the Durbars held in their honour in 1877 and 1903, respectively.



*The first Delhi Durbar, 1877.*



*The Second Delhi Durbar, 1903. Interestingly, the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, had asked that a royal boon be announced reducing the duty on salt, the same demand that the Mahatma was to later make for his Dandi March.*



*The third and last Durbar, 1911.*



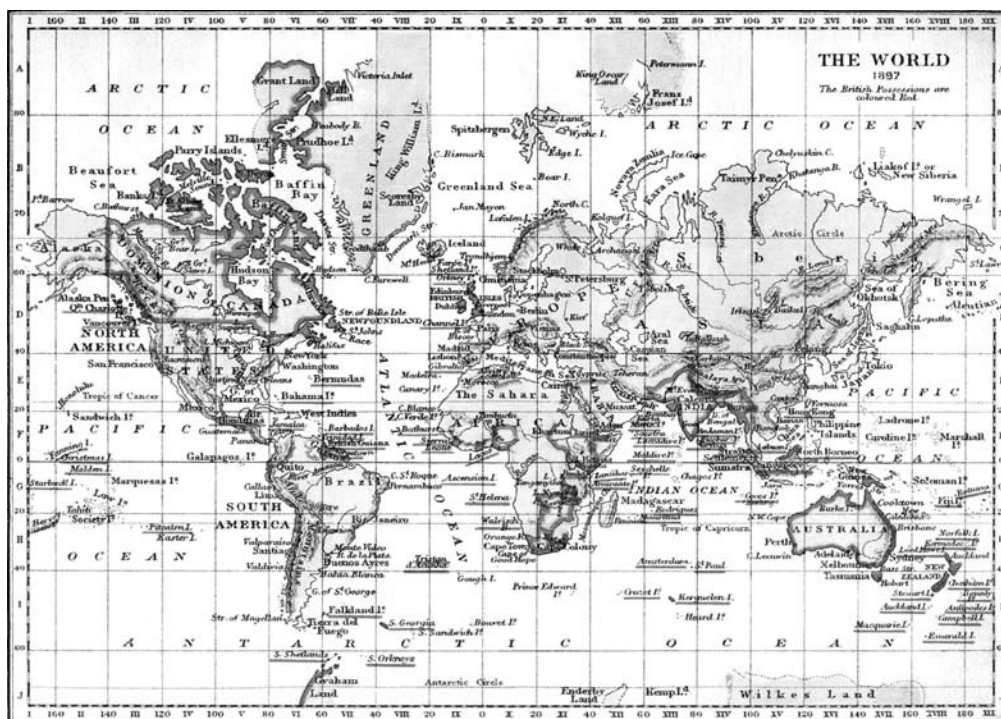
*Lord Hardinge, Viceroy of India, 1910-15. His dual mission was to arrange for the King's visit and Durbar, and to find an answer to the spiralling unrest in Bengal.*

When Lord Hardinge took over as Viceroy in 1910, he had a dual mission — to arrange for the King Emperor's visit and coronation in India within the year, and find an answer to the growing unrest in the country. Deeply aware that he had to follow in the wake of Lord Curzon's magnificent Durbar of 1903, the Viceroy immediately set to work.

There was a popular saying at the turn of the nineteenth century: 'the Sun never sets on the British Empire'. The Empire stretched from the South Sea Islands in the Pacific to Australia, New Zealand, Sarawak, Brunei, Hong Kong, North Borneo, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia, to Mesopotamia, Gibraltar, Canada, Nova Scotia,



The Newfoundland, the Bahamas, Honduras, Trinidad, and the Falkland Islands off the coast of South America. The Great War, World War I, which saw the collapse of mighty European empires, was still three years away. Britannia ruled the waves and India was its most precious prize. In fact, had the Durbar been delayed, World War I would have begun and the building of New Delhi might never have taken place! But then these are the 'ifs' of history.



*The British Empire where the sun never sets.*

As the year 1911 dawned, the only dark clouds over the Government of India were those left in the wake of Lord Curzon's Machiavellian Partition of Bengal into two in 1905. Although it was said that the measure was taken for administrative convenience, Indian national opinion saw it as part of a policy to divide and rule the country on communal lines. The resulting unrest unleashed a reign of terror which spread its tentacles across the land as a new spirit of militant nationalism emerged.



*Queen Victoria as Kaiser-e-Hind, Empress of India, 1877.*



*The Uprising of 1857.*

The first of the three great Delhi Durbars was held in 1877 by Lord Lytton to proclaim Queen Victoria *Kaiser-e-Hind*, Empress of India. The 1857 War of Independence had brought an end to the East India Company, and the Government of India directly under the British Crown with the Viceroy as its sole representative. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli felt the time had come to prominently announce British supremacy.

By this time Victoria had sat on the British throne for forty years and had a lot to feel satisfied about. The Sun was shining brightly over the Empire. The British had vanquished Napoleon and trounced the Russian Bear at Balaklava. Promising to respect the religions and ancient laws and customs of her Indian subjects, the Queen had ruled her Empire with rare dignity.

King Edward VII succeeded to the throne with Victoria's death in 1901, and the then Viceroy Lord Curzon offered to hold a Durbar to celebrate his coronation. Curzon wrote, 'To the East there is something... sacred in the practice that brings sovereigns in communion with their people in a ceremony of public solemnity'. The King could not come but he sent his brother, the Duke of Connaught, as his

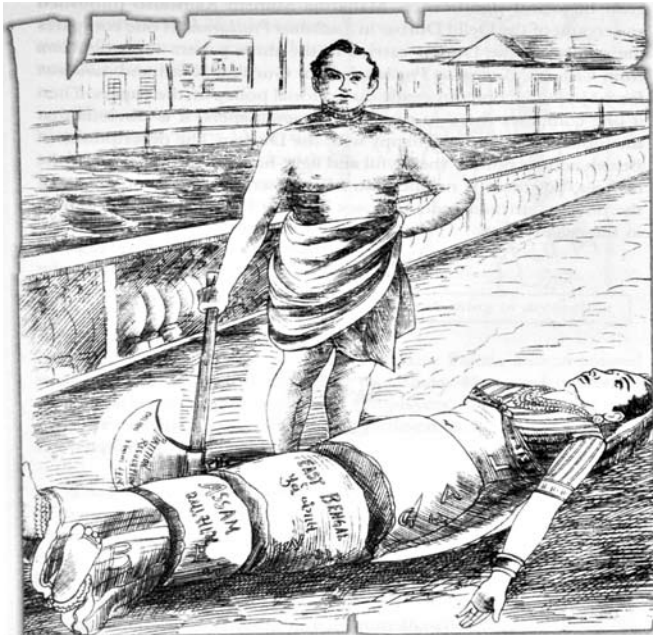


*Lord Curzon as Viceroy of India, 1898-1905, with his beautiful American-born wife.*

representative. Curzon was dismayed. He said, 'The Viceroy represents the sovereign. He cannot... step down and take second place'. Protocol decreed that it was the Viceroy who was supreme on Indian soil, so the proud Viceroy presided over the ceremonies while the Duke reconciled himself to a lesser place. Curzon was criticized in the vernacular press for not showing sufficient respect to his royal guest.

Durbars were also an occasion for granting royal boons and favours to the subjects. Significantly, Curzon had requested an announcement repealing the salt tax at the Durbar. But his cabinet colleagues in England, not a little resentful of the glory the Viceroy was enjoying in India, had refused. Ironically, had Curzon, the most imperial of viceroys, succeeded, Mahatma Gandhi may not have undertaken his Dandi March for the same cause — namely salt — and there may not have been a Salt Satyagraha to catapult India's Independence struggle to the world arena!

Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal in 1905 had fuelled deep resentment, perceived as it was as a diabolical design to divide and rule India on religious lines. The



*Cartoon in a Gujarati newspaper depicting the outrage over Curzon's dismembering of Bengal.*

founding of the Muslim League with the blessings of Curzon's successor Lord Minto in 1906 only served to endorse the fear. The resulting agitation spread as far as the Punjab and Maharashtra. Vernacular newspapers inflamed youthful passions and secret societies mushroomed across the countryside. 'A cruel wrong has been inflicted upon our Bengali brethren and the whole country has been stirred to its deepest depth with sorrow and resentment as has never been the case before,' protested the usually moderate Gopal Krishan Gokhale, President of



*Calcutta, a home-away-from-home that was forever London.*

the Indian National Congress. The ensuing unrest was striking hammer blows at the foundation of the Raj.

The new Viceroy, Lord Minto, like his predecessor, upheld the Partition, convinced that its revocation would be taken as surrendering to agitation and lowering the prestige of the Raj. Governmental policy hovered, therefore, between repressive legislation, deportation without trial and conciliatory gestures, hoping for the 'mists to lift' and 'the roseate days' of British rule to return. When, however, the first ingeniously produced bomb was exploded in Muzaffarpur in 1908, the Government recognized it as a wake-up call for John Bull. A nervous Secretary of State for India, Lord Morley, warned the Viceroy that 'The villainy of the bombs makes a new situation for us... the old days are gone... we cannot carry on upon the old maxims.' The wife and daughter of an English pleader were accidentally killed in the attack. Of the two assassins, one committed suicide and the other, 18-year-old Khudiram Bose, was sent to the gallows, but not before he had become a national martyr. Students went into mourning and his photograph was sold in the markets.



*Lord Hardinge's State Entry into Delhi, minutes before a bomb attack, 1912.*



Lord Minto, Viceroy of India, 1905-10, coming down heavily on the hydra of terror raised by the revolutionaries—Hindi Punch, May 1908.

The chain of political assassinations continued unabated. The Mintos had a narrow escape when their carriage was bombed in Ahmedabad. So did the Hardinges as they made a State Entry into Delhi in 1912. His attendant was killed instantaneously.

Lord Hardinge succeeded Minto as Viceroy in November 1910. An astute career diplomat, Hardinge realized the need to calm the agitators, although he was initially reluctant to reverse Curzon's decision. It would be tantamount to giving in 'to the noisy clamour' of the revolutionaries, he felt. But six months later the Viceroy said, 'Nothing could be worse... than the condition of Bengal and Eastern Bengal'. The new Viceroy had soon got down to work preparing for the Durbar, confessing, however, that it would be 'an immense relief' when the royal visit was over.

With the Coronation Durbar of 1903, his predecessor Lord Curzon had written a new chapter in the history of the regalia of the Empire. With his characteristic thoroughness, Curzon had supervised its organization to the last detail. He even had a Circuit House especially built in Delhi. After the shift of the capital, this became the Viceroy's Lodge for seventeen years until Lord and Lady Irwin were able to move to the Viceroy's House built by Edwin Lutyens in 1929. Today, this building is part of the Vice-Chancellor's office at Delhi University. Deeply conscious of the comparisons that might be drawn, Hardinge wrote home to a friend: 'I wish you could see the camps and all the preparations. They are on a very large scale — far larger than those of Curzon's Durbar...'

Raising funds for the Imperial Crown had presented some problems. Who would pay for it? Indian princes? Public subscription? Eventually it was decided that the money would come from Indian revenues. Studded with 6,170 diamonds, the Crown had sapphires, emeralds and rubies sewn onto a velvet miniver cap. Designed by the Crown jewellers



*Council House which became the Viceregal Lodge for 17 years. Today it is part of Delhi University.*

Garrad & Co in London, it weighed around 34 oz or 2 lb, and the King said it gave him a headache. The Crown now lies with the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. The Durbar Tiara for the Queen was also designed by Garrad & Co. It is said that Curzon had wanted the Imperial Crown to remain permanently in India but Hardinge, fearing that the presence of the Crown in India might be a temptation for an ambitious conqueror, insisted on it being taken back to England!

But even more troublesome for the Viceroy was the problem of finding a 'Grand Gesture' or a 'boon' which was expected of the King Emperor at the Durbar by his people on this solemn occasion.

In the meanwhile, there was much to be done: 300,000 visitors were expected in Delhi and the great arena had to be designed to accommodate 100,000 visitors. Arrangements had to be made for the main ceremony, the investiture, military displays and so on.

The New Delhi we know today was then a barren wasteland. As a visitor to the 1911 Durbar said, 'Delhi lay on a malarial plain surrounded by melancholy vestiges of ruined and departed alien greatness'.

In a whirl of activity, vast spaces were cleared to make way for the arrangements.



*Royal Crown specially made, now with the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London.*

J. Renton-Denning in his *Delhi: The Imperial City*, published a few months before the Durbar in October 1911, wrote: '.... the main problem for the vast majority of visitors to Delhi...is the housing one. If one can secure room in one of the surreptitiously furnished "visitors' camps", he may be congratulated.... Hotel accommodation is expected to be taxed to the utmost capacity; the two largest hotels in Delhi — Maiden's and the Cecil — having been respectively rented by an Indian Prince and the Supreme Government...'

Delhi turned into a fortress as thousands of tents came up to shelter the royal party, officers from the army, the civil services, other dignitaries, and last but not





*The barren wasteland outside Purana Quilla.*

the least, the 562 Indian princes with their priceless jewels and fabled entourages. The Durbar camp spread over 25 sq miles across present-day Civil Lines to Timarpur, Jehangirpuri, Shalimar Bagh, Ashok Vihar, Model Town and Shakarpur. The camp had its own railway and 64 km of new roads were built. Delhi was expected to witness a concentration of wealth and power that even the Tsar of all the Russias could not equal.

On December 2, 1911, the royal party sailed into Bombay. There was a minor hiccup at the time of the King's State Entry into Delhi. The King had chosen to ride a horse and his presence went unnoticed by those who expected a royal elephant in full regalia. Seeing the Viceroy atop an elephant, the crowds exclaimed, 'There is the Lord Sahib. But where is the King?' Hardinge was to note that although the King tried making *salaams*, 'he was disappointed at his non-recognition by the people'. Thereafter it was smoother sailing except at the State Investiture of awards when a tent belonging to the Maharaja of Bhawalpur caught fire, threatening to burn down the entire cantonment.

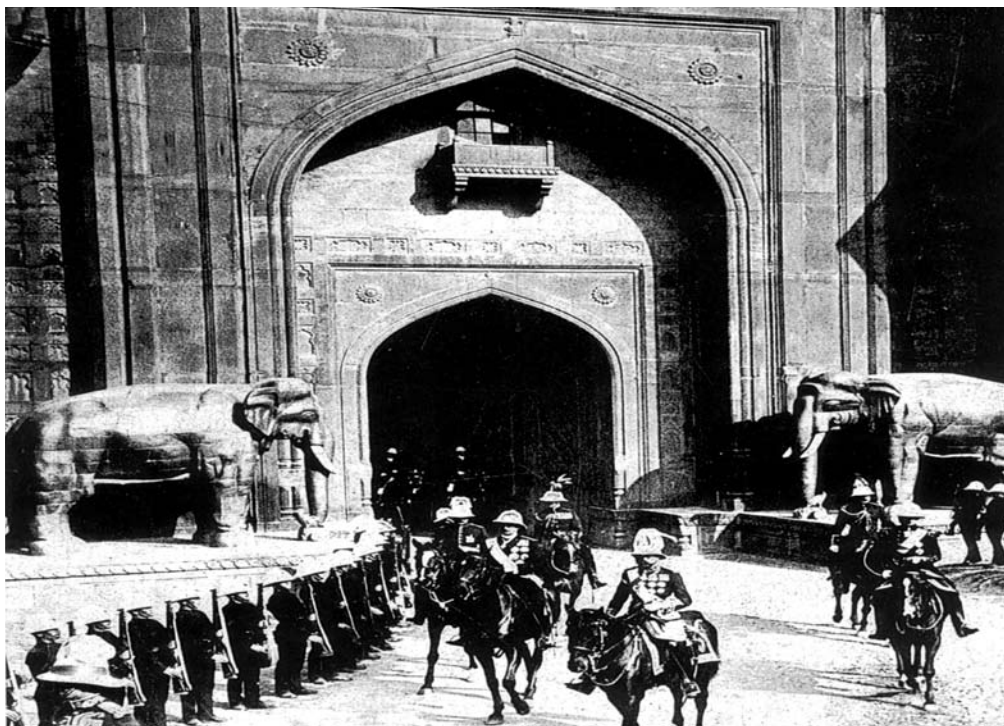


*The route taken at the Durbar.*



*The royal entry.*

Two amphitheatres were to be created in Coronation Park on the same site as that of Lord Lytton's Assemblage of 1877 and Lord Curzon's Durbar of 1903: the smaller of the two amphitheatres to have 12,000 seats to accommodate the very special guests including Governors, Commanders-in-Chief, Lt. Governors, and India's 562 Ruling Chiefs, and the larger one for the public with over 50,000 seats. About 6,000 seats were to be reserved for school children and another 20,000 troops had to be accommodated.



*The King's State Entry. The King chose to ride a horse instead of the customary royal elephant.*



*Troops at the parade.*

On the appointed day, the golden cupolas of the amphitheatre dazzled and gleamed in the morning Sun, recalling the grandeur of an impressive Moghul heritage, with guests in resplendent uniforms and glittering jewels. The ceremonies included a 101 gun salute, a meeting with the princes, a review parade and the distribution of medals.

All the Indian rulers were present — exotic, flamboyant, some enlightened, some decadent, their tales of wealth and peccadilloes were what legends are made of. Apart from their palaces in India, they frequently maintained houses in London, Paris and the Riviera. The less fortunate reconciled themselves to reserving vast suites at hotels such as Claridges and The Savoy in London for the entire length of their stay, surrounded each day by massive bouquets of freshly-cut hot-house flowers. The more flamboyant the better. One prince even used human babies as tiger bait at his shoots, boasting that he always got the tiger before it got the bait. Yet another prince kept 60,000 pigeons as a hobby, arranging elaborate marriage ceremonies for them. On the other hand, however, were enlightened rulers who worked ceaselessly for the emancipation of the people.

Notable among those present at the Durbar was the Begum of Bhopal who, unlike her grandmother, came dressed in a *burqa*. Also present was Maharaja Yadvindra Singh of Patiala with his entourage of ladies.

Nawab Osman Ali Khan, Nizam of Hyderabad, was conspicuous by his presence. Considered among the world's richest men, he is said to have restricted his personal expenditure to cigarettes and betel nut. He wore the same fez cap for thirty-five years. After his death, his son found the Jacob's diamond in the toe of an old slipper.

The Gaekwad of Baroda, like the Nizam of Hyderabad, enjoyed the privilege of a 21 gun salute. An enlightened ruler, he established colleges and schools and encouraged the emancipation of women and untouchables. Despite his impressive cavalcade, the Gaekwad was noted not to have made adequate obeisance to the King. Incidentally, the Gaekwad was known to have provided a safe haven to many militant nationalists, including Sri Aurobindo who was the high priest of the agitation in Bengal.

The King and his consort in robes of purple and gold sat on silver thrones in the Royal Pavilion at the centre of the great arena. 'The greatest show on earth', read the headlines in a leading English daily. And indeed it was. The pomp and pageantry

was as expected of the largest Empire in the world. Behind the royal couple were the royal princes of India in their finery. The resplendent Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, stood at the side. In attendance were the bearers with golden maces who always



*Statue of King George V. Transferred from Rajpath to Coronation Park, it stands now in forlorn majesty.*

preceded the King. Also present were the King's bodyguard, handpicked men on horseback, clad in tunics of blue, scarlet and gold.

With the sound of trumpets and the roll of drums the King rose to make the Royal announcements: transfer of the governance of India from Calcutta to the ancient capital of Delhi and the simultaneous reunification of Bengal.

The announcement fell like a bombshell on an unsuspecting people. In one stroke Delhi was being raised from its humble status as a provincial city of the Punjab to being the proud capital of the subcontinent of Hindustan. These momentous decisions were arrived at after several deliberations held in the greatest secrecy.

Surprisingly, it was the King himself who played a substantial role in arriving at these decisions. Indian historian Dr. Z.H. Zaidi maintains that it was the King's 'fixed desire' to revoke Partition. The King was conscious of the 'seditious spirit' in



*Abandoned statues at Coronation Park.*

the land, having visited India in the aftermath of the Partition in December 1905. He may have been privy to gusty cries of 'Bande Matram', might even have seen or heard stories of violent clashes with the sentries, or of bonfires being made of Manchester cloth on the streets of Calcutta. But as the Secretary of State pointed out, being only a constitutional sovereign, the King could not 'assume the position and powers of the Great Moghul' even in India.

Hardinge, who had initially scoffed at the King's suggestion, saying it was 'quite impracticable', had quickly discovered that 'anarchy is far from dead' in India. The revolutionaries driven underground were on the warpath.

Eventually it was this seemingly hopeless situation on the ground that persuaded Hardinge to change his mind and confess to the Secretary of State, 'The results anticipated... have not been attained... the political power of the Bengalis has not been broken... they will never cease to agitate until they have obtained a modification of the partition'.

In the meantime, the Viceroy's council, working overtime to find a solution for Bengal and a suggestion for 'the Grand Gesture', had come up with a twin proposal — reunite Bengal and transfer the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. The Home Minister in the Viceroy's Council, a hitherto diehard supporter of Partition, now argued, 'the peculiar situation which has arisen since the Partition makes it imminently desirable to withdraw the Government of India from its present Provincial environment'. Quick to seize the advantage, Hardinge said, 'It is like killing two birds with one stone'. The proposals were accepted and it was resolved that they would be announced by the King at the Durbar in the garb of boons. Thus the repeal of Partition was made to look like the King's concession to his people's prayers and not a climb down by a government giving in to the agitation.

Curzon was kept in the dark till the end. Later he was to thunder in Parliament, ranting at his successors for shielding behind the person of the King. He said, 'You invest it with a sacrosanct character by putting it in the mouth of the sovereign... you have done it in a manner that saves you from retribution and screens you from attack'. Because of these historic announcements, the Durbar of 1911 acquires added significance. For these announcements are said to have had a profound effect on the future of modern Indian history.



*Homeward Bound.*

Thirty-five years later Pandit Nehru was sworn in as Prime Minister of independent India and the British Government left our shores forever. The old superstition had proved to be inexorably true — that no ruling party that shifted its seat of government to the ancient capital that was Delhi survived for long.

Three days after the announcement, the foundation stone of New Delhi was laid by the King and the Queen with elaborate ivory mallets and silicon trowels at Coronation Park. The King in his speech said, 'It is my desire that the planning and designing... be considered with the greatest deliberation and care, so that the new creation may be in every way worthy of this ancient and beautiful city'. Two years later the site was found to be dangerously close to a flood-prone area and the foundation stone was quietly shifted to the base of the new Secretariat building.





*The making of New Delhi.*

Thus began the building of New Delhi, a metropolis of immense grandeur and beauty. It was India's good fortune that 43-year-old Edwin Lutyens had been brought in to design the city. Today, the sheer power and beauty of Lutyens' creation and his aesthetic synthesis of the East and West is a treat for the eyes. Herbert Baker, his assistant, was also his rival, but it was Lutyens' genius that transformed New Delhi into the majestic capital that can vie with best in the world.

King George's statue has lost its commanding position on Kingsway/Rajpath where he had been the monarch of all he surveyed. It now lingers at Coronation Park in stately but somewhat forlorn majesty. The statues of Viceroys are also lying in a derelict condition at the Park. They probably hold little meaning for India's young generation; however, they are part and parcel of 300 years of Indian history and it would be churlish on our part as modern, vibrant and emancipated Indians to deny them a fitting requiem.

I think it is fitting that Coronation Park is finally being readied to give these empire-builders of yore their rightful place in history.



Nayana Goradia read English Literature at Washington State University and Girton College, Cambridge. She received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Calcutta.

Her biography, *Lord Curzon: The Last of the British Moghuls*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1993, remains in print.

Ms Goradia is currently involved in education, helping to develop The Indian School, of which she is Vice-President. She lives in New Delhi with her husband, Prafull Goradia, a former Member of Parliament.





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