Mimesis and Assemblage: The Imperial Durbars at Delhi

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Mimesis and Assemblage

The Imperial Durbars at Delhi

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It is well-established that the British—until 1857 in the form of the East India Company—adopted and conformed to local customs and notions of rightful authority in their incremental annexation and subjection of South Asian polities. As part of this concurrent adaptation and advancement, the British emulated and appropriated symbols and rituals associated with the sovereign expressions of ‘native rulers’. In the early years of imperial expansion, the East India Company was only one among a set of viable contenders for regional hegemony, which impelled it to establish the Resident system—according to which all diplomatic engagements by ‘princely’ states had to be channeled and conveyed through a British agent stationed at the princely court (or durbar). Over time, this system altered courtly symbols and rituals to the extent that the Residents themselves became associated with prestige and recognition, while at the same time impressing on the British the value of upholding the courts’ function of maintaining hierarchy and affirming status. The British were also, to echo Douglas E. Haynes (1990; 1991), increasingly inclined to—while outwardly disparaging it—recognise the co-constitution of ‘ritual order’ and ‘political order’ in a South Asian context, which is especially manifest in British attempts to project notions of imperial paramountcy as reflective of, derived from and consonant with ‘tradition’.

This is the backdrop to and the constitutive dynamics of the three imperial durbars (or, as they are also known, assemblages) that were held at Delhi in 1877, 1903 and 1911. As symbolic events, they were arranged with the intent to, on the one hand, place the British monarch at the centre of imperial order and, on the other hand, provide a visual and tactile representation of imperial unity, authority and hierarchy. These were all large-scale affairs. It was, for instance, estimated that the first imperial durbar was attended by ‘at least eighty-four thousand people’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 196), whereas the last one had an anticipated attendance of two hundred thousand (Frykenberg 1986: 377). Equally valid for considering the ways in which the British Empire in South Asia was rendered meaningful and tangible through ritual is the, after much debate, cancelled imperial durbar and royal visit in 1937-38. In this paper, I explore the ‘imperial values’ (expression borrowed from Kaul 2006: 465) that were on display—both at the imperial durbars and in the late-colonial ritualised settings where British officials were drawn into engagements with princely rulers and imperial subjects—and I ask to what extent these, and their heightened visibility, signified ruptures or continuities with earlier periods during which imperial encounters and
transactions were of a less public and ritualised character. I, moreover, address the question of how the imperial durbars signified a certain imagery of empire, one propounding its assumed qualities of actuating peace, order and ‘good government’.

Delhi as a Permanent Durbar

In any analysis of the imperial durbars of 1877, 1903 and 1911, Delhi stands out as a condensation point for the symbolic investments that were made and the political ambitions that were articulated as part of these major events. In 1877, Delhi had been reduced to a marginal and depopulated city as a response to the failed uprising against the British in 1857. Percival Spear, for instance, described the period after 1857 as one of ‘virtual oblivion’, not fully overcome ‘until the proclamation of Delhi as the new capital of British India in 1911’ (1986: 474). The city was, nevertheless, seen to stand for and offer a necessary anchorage for British aspirations to provide good government in the form of a benevolent and virtuous empire in the region.

Delhi was, simultaneously, idealised as the site of British heroism at the time of the 1857 Mutiny and as the main seat of Mughal rule. By projecting overlaps with the latter, the British sought to both position themselves at the centre of authority, with clearly assigned feudatory relations to the rulers of princely states, and as the main catalyst for and maintainer of Indian unity. Drawing on Kristan Tetens, it might be said that the imperial durbars at Delhi allowed for ‘a simulacrum of the very unity of empire’ in general and of India as a Crown Colony specifically (2003: 270). The British here built on their imperial predecessors’, and princely contemporaries’, use of the durbar as a ‘quintessential emblem of the unity of the state’ (Edward S. Haynes 1990: 470) as well as on the impression that ‘among the symbols of empire none had greater resonance than that of the British Crown’, especially when it came to offering ‘a visible embodiment for an otherwise diffuse and fragmented entity’ (Kaul 2006: 464f).

Alan Trevithick, resonant with the above, refers to the three imperial durbars or assemblages that were arranged in Delhi as instances and expressions ‘of explicitly political rituals’, that were designed and enacted to advance the legitimacy of and support for British paramountcy in India (1990: 561). Trevithick, thus, emphasises how the
imperial durbars did not solely work to convey, impose and reinforce British hegemony. The durbar as a public and political ritual, he insists, rather coheres with the view that, although “consensus” is the representation sought in ritual events, [...] ritual often provides, as well, a performative arena for the pursuit of diverse, even competing interests’ (ibid. 562). His assertion might not be fully accurate as concerns the overall and gaugeable impact of ‘native’ dissent, but the imperial durbars work well as nodal points for engaging and making manifest the varying, and not always consonant, positions held by the British regarding how to construe and impose authority on imperial subjects.

The imperial durbar of 1877 (officially designated the Proclamation Durbar) was, in line with the above, concurrently looked upon as an opportunity to memorialise the ‘heroic acts’ of the British twenty years earlier and to allow for close relations and a deepened sense of allegiance ‘to develop […] between [‘the native’] “aristocracy” and the crown’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 188). The very site of the durbar was, aligned with the first of these objectives, the same as where one of the most intense battles of the 1857 Mutiny had taken place; and a crucial part of the assemblage was the ‘plan to present […] ninety of the leading Indian princes and chiefs with large banners emblazoned with their’, newly and by the British invented, ‘coats of arms’ (ibid. 191). The bestowal of the banners was intended to be ‘an expression of linear hierarchic order’, one that placed ‘the Indian princes’ as ‘the legal subjects of Queen Victoria’ (ibid.).

The second imperial durbar, held in 1903 to celebrate the crowning of Edward VII as the Emperor of India and mainly organised by Lord Curzon, Governor-General and Viceroy of India between 1899 and 1905, was similarly intended to affirm ‘British achievements’ during the Mutiny (Nagai 2005: 87). Delhi was again deemed incomparable as a site when it came to allowing for such ‘commemoration’ — and it was, during the preparations, described not only as the main stage for the Mutiny, but as ‘a privileged space where the symbolical writing and overwriting of power was performed’ (ibid. 88). The durbar’s most spectacular and ‘memorable’ feature was to be ‘the sight of the [...] old veterans of the Mutiny’, which Nagai comments in the following way: ‘Curzon found in these Mutiny veterans what he had been looking for — “relics or memorials” of the greatest event of the Empire, the thrilling scenes and the dramatic incidents that it had witnessed’ (ibid. 90f). A princely spectator and participant, the Maharajah of Bobbili, who had also been invited to London for the 1902 coronation ceremony, approvingly wrote in his diary that “[t]he Mutiny Veterans entered the arena a little after
twelve, and were received with enthusiastic cheers from all sides of the [a]mphitheatre. There was something very affecting in the sight of so many [v]eterans marching in to take part in the imposing ceremony’ (MSS EUR F234/131).

Although the durbar, which lasted two weeks, saw the presence of ‘over a hundred rulers of separate Indian states and the representatives of foreign states’ (Nagai 2005: 90), Nagai points to an underpinning and constitutive uncertainty as regards the future stability and perpetuity of British imperial rule. She notes that the ‘desire to commemorate the Indian Empire’ by arranging an imperial durbar in 1903, was—to a significant extent—based on ‘an anxiety that the British traces might be easily wiped out’ (ibid. 92). From a, with us, more contemporary viewpoint, the opposite of course seems true. As Ann Laura Stoler has asked: ‘how do imperial formations persist in their material debris, in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people’s lives?’ (2013: 10, italics added). This is an accurate contemplation on the continued impact of empire and the long-lasting relevance of ‘imperial debris’ (or ‘rubble’, to speak with Gastón R. Gordillo (2014)). Gordillo, however, seems to capture and account for Curzon’s worry—experienced and articulated at the very inception of the 20th century—when writing that ‘early modernist anxieties about the fragility of state power were also molded by experiences of decay on the global edges of imperial expansion’ (ibid. 57), and, I would add, vice versa; and he also seems to hint at a reason why Curzon’s anxiety was unwarranted while contending that ‘[w]hile “the ruin” certainly evokes rupture, it also evokes a unified object that elite sensibilities often treat as a fetish that ought not be disturbed’ (ibid. 6)—which the continued celebration and preservation of imperial architecture and monuments is testament to.

The imperial durbar in 1911 marked ‘the first’, and only, ‘time a reigning British monarch visited India’ (Frykenberg 1986: 373). A core component of the durbar was when ‘all of the great notables’, including the rulers of the Princely States, ‘came forward, one by one, to do homage’ (ibid. 378). The King-Emperor, George V, was appositely seated on ‘the homage pavilion’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 208). An even more momentous feature of the last imperial assemblage was the, by most, completely unforeseen announcement that the capital of British India would be relocated from Calcutta to Delhi. This has, above all, been portrayed as a necessary outcome of the accompanying enunciation that the 1905 decision to partition the province of Bengal had been revoked, and that the seat of power, as a consequence, had to be decisively
detached from provincial affairs. However, it was, moreover, ‘regarded as
an exercise of Sovereign power, such as oriental people respect and
admire’ (J.L. Jenkins, cited in Trevithick 1990: 571)¹ and it ought, finally,
to be seen as yet a confirmation of Delhi’s allure as the seat of imperial
rule—i.e. as part of a third and ultimate attempt to, through the
arrangement of an imperial durbar, ‘tap into the city’s ancient prestige’
(Legg 2007: 27). Why, otherwise, deprive Calcutta of its longstanding pre-
eminence by making ‘all the infrastructure of its highly trained local
personnel and of its intricate local support systems’ redundant
(Frykenberg 1986: 370)?

R.E. Frykenberg has, as a partial explanation, claimed that much of
the initiative behind arranging a ‘Coronation Durbar’, as the imperial
durbar was designated in 1911, and to— at its very end— announce the
annulment of the 1905 partition of Bengal came from George V himself,
and that the latter was, well into 1911, known only by a ‘small circle
around the King’ (ibid. 373f). David A. Johnson offers a similar
assessment while contending that ‘[e]xcept for a handful of close officials
to the viceroy and the king, most […] were unprepared for such a
momentous decision’ (2008: 464). This is remarkable given that George V
was ‘barred by British law and tradition from free exercise of those
powers that were held to be associated in the “native mind” with genuine
sovereignty’; after all, ‘only [the] Government of India in consultation
with the Secretary of State could legislate or administer legal remedies’
or decisions (Trevithick 1990: 570). A question that, as a result, calls for
an answer is: what were the adhered to views, as retrievable in the
colonial archives, of how to respond to and exercise imperial sceptre in
relation to this seeming anomaly?

Finally, the resulting construction of New Delhi as the new site for
an imperial capital deserves attention. It was inaugurated in 1931 and its
broad layout and most important buildings were informed by ideas that
the city would equal ‘a national and international showcase’, one that
would disseminate ‘a symbolic argument for the continuation of not just
Indian colonialism but also British imperialism in the twentieth century’
(Legg 2007: 217)— which is paradoxical given that imperial rule in India
was severely eroded and extensively challenged at this point. It was, as

¹ The idea of a distinct ‘oriental mind’ with a penchant for the ‘ceremonial and […] pageantry’ (see MSS EUR F125/139) was a recurring theme in British projections of the ‘child-like’ ways in which Indians generally related to the sovereign ‘as an almost divine being who wields unlimited power’ (MSS EUR F253/14).
Tim Barringer (by paraphrasing Jyoti 1992) notes, conceived of as being equivalent to ‘a permanent durbar, a stage-set for a performance piece of colonial domination through daily ritual and through the control of space […]’ (2006: 175); and, hence, ‘a capital worthy of the British Empire’ (Johnson 2008: 462).

Much like the three imperial durbars as described above, New Delhi ‘was meant to impress the Indian [audience] with the special greatness of Britain’s empire’ by, on the one hand, establishing an imaginary lineage between British rule and ‘India’s own imperial past’ and, on the other hand, inducing and inculcating ‘a sense of pride in the unique accomplishments of the British Raj’ (Metcalf 1986: 399). As such, New Delhi as a symbolic statement and ritualised space was meant to—in continuation of what the imperial durbar in 1911 had tried to achieve—further the impression of imperial rule as ‘an amalgam’ and synthesis of British and Indian practices, rather than as a mere expression of ‘British suzerainty’ (Nuckolls 1990: 530). The use and projection of Delhi as a permanent durbar is, hence, an evident instance of how, to speak with David I. Kertzer, ‘[n]ew political systems borrow legitimacy from the old by nurturing the old ritual forms, redirected to new purposes’ (1988: 42).

It also gives support to Norbert Peabody’s understanding of the relationship between colonial and pre-colonial authority in South Asia, i.e. that ‘it is always incumbent on those who aspire to positions of power and authority to domesticate competing discourses by incorporating aspects of them into derivative locations within their own creeds’ (2003: 170).

An Imperial Palimpsest: Adopting and Revising Mughal Court Rituals

In this paper, while considering the ritual content of the imperial durbars, I rely upon Catherine Bell’s account of rituals, in which ‘the focus on ritual as a set of special practices’ is replaced by ‘a focus on some of the more common strategies of “ritualization”’ (1992: ix; cf. Kertzer 1988: 9)—i.e. ‘a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities’ (Bell 1992: 74). Bell writes that such an approach allows for “[c]onfronting the ritual act itself” by ‘asking how ritual activities, in their doing, generate distinctions between what is or is
not acceptable ritual’ (*ibid*. 80). Consequently, ‘[at a basic level, ritualization is the production of this differentiation’ (*ibid*. 90). Bell, thus, offers a theory of ritual that is neither emphasising ‘the distinctiveness of ritual, how it is clearly different from all other kinds of activity’ nor ‘the congruity of ritual with other forms of human action, usually by seeing ritual as “the expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect” of action in general’ (*ibid*. 70). As such, it is useful for the present purposes, since a key task, while analysing the imperial durbar as a set of ritual practices and disseminations, is to avoid a reinforcement of its unique or exotic character rather than to incorporate it into global and interconnected histories.

At the same time, it seems necessary to, with Eric Csapo (2005: 157), recognise that “ritual” must always already involve some degree of abstraction and stereotypification beyond mere emotional reaction; it must always already contain mental imagery and symbolism’, while also insisting on (in consonance with Bell’s theorising) that a ‘neat distinction between impulse, action, doing, and ritual, on the one hand, and reflection, conceptualization, speech, and myth on the other’ remains untenable. Although Kertzer’s insistence on rituals as ‘symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive’ is incongruent with Bell’s reasoning, he makes a good, and for us valid, point when he states that ‘[t]hrough ritual […] we not only make sense of the world around us, but we also are led to believe that the order we see is not of our own (cultural) making, but rather an order that belongs to the external world itself’ (1988: 9, 85). In the case of the imperial durbar, and its intended signalling of imperial order, authority, unity, necessity, etc., this is surely a key trait and consequence of the enacted rituals.

*The Incessant Spectacle of Imperial Bureaucracy*

In a general reflection on what the imperial durbar as such denoted, Barringer maintains that ‘the durbar was essentially a Mughal form, self-consciously adapted [by the British] to add luster to British rule after […] [the] creation of the new title of Empress of India for Queen Victoria in 1876’ and to cast the three imperial durbars ‘as the solemn and necessary continuation of an immemorial Indian tradition’ (2006: 175f). The British had, however, fundamentally altered its meaning. During the 19th century, they gradually moved away from seeing and arranging the
durban foremost as ‘an act of incorporation’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 168). Whereas the Mughal durbar principally revolved around the exchange of ‘graded’ items or gifts between the ruler and those attending the court—i.e. ‘ritual prestations’ that, according to Bernard Cohn, represented and effectuated ‘a relationship between the giver and [the] receiver’ that exceeded the mere ‘exchange of goods and valuables’ (ibid.)—the British replaced the Mughal ‘ritual of incorporation’ with one ‘marking subordination’ (ibid. 172). We might designate this ‘a change in the grammar of [political] performance’—with the last-mentioned referring to ‘performances that seek to communicate to an audience meaning-making related to state institutions, policies and discourses’ (Rai 2015: 1179). However, although a change took place, it is also evident that the British retained the intimate connection of the durbar and, what Bell refers to as, ritualisation.

At the heart of the durbar, the British, thus, installed ‘a kind of “economic exchange”’ through which ‘the relationship between [the] British official and [the] Indian subject or ruler became contractual’ and ‘desacralised’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 172, 178). This was undoubtedly the outcome of a consistent endeavour by the British to come to terms with the courtly rituals that they encountered, as their empire expanded and gained both in territorial extension and in the amassment of set assumptions about the societies that they came to govern. Cohn nicely captures this while asserting that, already from the outset ‘of their large-scale acquisition of territorial control and sovereignty, the British conceived of governing India by codifying and reinstituting the ruling practices that had been developed by previous states and rulers’ (1996: 5). It seems apt to add here that the British, in the case of the numerous polities that were kept under indirect rule, settled with leaving ‘the ruling practices’ broadly intact, and—as elaborated upon below—that they as a general rule tried to recruit ‘the administrative personnel employed by previous regimes’ (ibid.).

It is, consonant with the above, commonly acknowledged that ‘maintaining the Raj required the collaboration of powerful elite groupings’ (Haynes 1991: 103) and that the rulers of princely states were groomed and perceived as potentially loyal allies after 1857—i.e. as ‘the raw material from which […] a functioning feudal society’ was to be

2 The ruler accepted nazar (‘gold coins’) or peshkash (‘precious possessions’) and furnished khelat (‘robes of honour’) (see Cohn 2012[1983]: 168, 191).
moulded (Nuckolls 1990: 533). Trying to make sense of these conscious inclinations, Cohn has argued that there was a dual, and (in pragmatic terms) surprisingly reconcilable, objective of British rule after 1857: to, on the one hand, turn the rulers of princely states into “loyal feudatories” and to, on the other hand, promote ‘a new kind of civic or public order’ (2012:1983: 166). The latter was anticipated to enable Indians to partake in ‘a representational mode of government based sociologically on communities and interests with individuals representing these entities’ (ibid.). Homi Bhabha was, hence, correct in describing ‘colonial mimicry’ as ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite’ and that it ‘is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power’ (1984: 126).

Haynes supports the idea of a confluence of two ‘theories’ of British imperial rule in India. The first advanced the benefits of aligning with and ‘relying’ on the “natural leaders” of society, the hereditary headmen to whom Indians supposedly maintained a docile obedience; the second that, even though Indians were thought to be wanting in ‘the sense of public spiritedness needed for self-government, [...] with time, some could be “trained” or “educated” to assume responsible positions in public affairs’ (Haynes 1991: 104). Irrespective of what position British officials held and espoused regarding the most desirable objective, the British based their rule on the impression that “[r]eliance on “native” informants and leaderships with roots in local society was essential” (ibid. 103). For local elites, such recognition of ‘natural’ leadership and of being “native gentlemen” often brought about participation in a broad range of ‘symbolically significant’ events which were meant to, coincidentally, give ‘dramatic confirmation’ of ‘public leader[ship]’ and to indicate ‘subordination to the colonial rulers’ (ibid. 127).

In his own work on Surat, a city in western India, Haynes found that ‘district officers arranged many ceremonial observances, all designed to cement the ties of the population to the Raj’ (ibid. 128). A key characteristic of such observances, and of the participation in them, was that they both allowed for ‘deference to the imperial overlords’ to be articulated and for ‘a common ethical ground’, shared by local elites and the British, to be demonstrated (Haynes 1991: 129). As such, these rituals did not only serve to further British attempts ‘to capture important symbols of power’, but also became vehicles for ‘members of the local elite’ to convey that they were the rightful recipients and holders of ‘all
the privileges and influences associated with public leadership’ (ibid.). A description of local enactments of the durbar form that solely identifies these as corresponding to ‘a meaningless charade’ is, thus, erroneous (Douglas E. Haynes 1990: 493).

Rather, as Haynes puts it, ‘[r]itual events were crucial arenas of politics in which authority was generated, confirmed, and contested’ (ibid. 494). To refuse to participate in or elect to ‘abstain from ritual observances’ signalled giving up on ‘any sort of efficacy in a political arena dominated by British civil servants’ (ibid. 500). In this we find direct parallels to the way in which the durbar, as symbolic form and ritual content, worked prior to its British appropriation: ‘to refuse to appear for a ruler’s durbar or […] to behave improperly was a sign of contumacy, of disobedience, even tantamount to a rebellious declaration of independence’ (Edward S. Haynes 1990: 470). This, to reconnect with the reasoning on the imperial durbars, was a fate that befell the Maharaja of Baroda after the so-called ‘Durbar incident’ in 1911, during which the monarch—‘second in rank among the native rulers’—‘failed to observe protocol in doing obeisance to the King-Emperor and Queen-Empress’ (Nuckolls 1990: 529). The Maharaja was, according to himself, wrongly accused of having neglected to dress properly (he ‘wore a plain white dress and no jewelry’) and of behaving irreverent while carrying out his homage (Bhagavan 2001: 400).

Although the British took advantage of extant expectations on the proper ways of enacting and representing authority, recognition and hierarchy, the adoption of existing practices gave rise to problems relating to the status of British officials. How could the position at the helm of durbar-like ceremonies be made consistent with ideals of the impersonal and objective civil servant (Douglas E. Haynes 1990: 497)? The former, after all, entailed the celebration and furtherance of an individual’s ‘personal qualities’ and ‘ability to dispense favours’, which did not easily cohere with the called-for and desired conduct of imperial bureaucrats as detached ‘agents of a distant government’ (ibid.). A major challenge for the British was, hence, related to altering entrenched perceptions of transactions between rulers and subjects and, consequently, of the durbar as symbolic form. At the same time as they tried to tap into ‘Mughal ritual forms’, in order to ensure ‘the legitimacy

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3 With Jens Bartelson understood as ‘a mode of objectivation that has been allowed to structure the production of both meaning and experience’ (2014: 15).
of their own political empire’ and instil a specific set of ‘civic values’, there was an evident need to find ways of separating ‘ritual time [...] from work time’, ‘ritual space from work space’ \(\textit{ibid.}\). The British, in other words, struggled to bring about an appropriately ‘bureaucratic conception of ritual’—one that, contra the durbar in its traditional guise, was ‘depoliticize[d] and depersonalize[d]’ \(\textit{ibid.} 497\). The challenge, to more directly draw on the language of Bell, was how to make bureaucratic engagements quotidian and mundane rather than exceptional.

\textit{Residents as Interlocutors and Ritual Specialists}

In many parts of what, during the long 19th century, became British and Princely India, ‘[t]he central institution of ceremonial interaction was’, as alluded to above, ‘the durbar [...] or formal court or levee’ (Edward S. Haynes 1990: 461). ‘[A] standard dictionary definition’, according to Haynes, would read: ‘[a] house, dwelling, court, area; hall of audience, court; holding of a court, levee; royal audience, the executive government of a native state’ (Platts 1968, cited in \textit{ibid.}). Throughout their presence, first as a marginal power and then as regional hegemon, the British strove to, through ‘careful manipulation and regulation of symbolic usages’, appropriate the workings and significations of the durbars they were progressively confronted with and, eventually, came to replace or dominate \(\textit{ibid.} 462\).

At the princely courts, the formative interpretation and eventual recreation was principally done by the Resident—but it was also realised through the establishment ‘of interlocking treaties, alliances, and loyalties’ between the British and individual rulers \(\textit{ibid.} 466\). Another manifestation of the interplay between coming to terms with and carefully modifying courtly procedures was the positing, after 1857, of the Governor-General and Viceroy—‘being the same person’—as ‘the locus of authority in India’, which ‘all the British and Indians could be ranked in relation to’ (Cohn 2012[1983]: 181), as represented by the seating arrangements and order of homage at the imperial durbar in 1911. However, to arrive at the point where the British (ostensibly) mastered the symbolic meanings of installing the Viceroy in this position was far from a straightforward endeavour.

Much of the initial task and effort to grasp the context in which the British operated fell on the ‘early Residents’ and, in particular, on their ability to locate and interact with ‘native informants’ and ‘intermediaries’ (Fisher 1990: 421). The latter was crucial given that they ‘found
themselves in a diplomatic world largely unfamiliar and alien to them’, which prompted them to, at the various courts, employ ‘an Indian expert in the Persianized protocol of civil ritual and the art or science of diplomacy: a Munshi’ *(ibid.)*. This is indicative of what Michael H. Fisher writes, i.e. that ‘in India the Europeans were at first very much the soliciting intruder’ *(1990: 428)*, which became a circumstance to be negotiated, rather than overcome by overwhelming force. The British, as seen above, came to gradually modify the exchange of gifts between rulers and subjects to be principally ‘economic in nature and function’ *(Cohn 2012|1983]: 169)*, which was very much in line with their initial understanding of the value of objects that were exchanged at Indian courts. They, thus, overlooked and disregarded that ‘the value of the objects was not set in a market, but by the ritual act of incorporation’ *(ibid.)*.

Even in periods of undeniable dominance, the British—in order to adhere to the ‘principle of indirect rule which the Resident embodied’—opted ‘to support the symbolic expression of the Ruler’s authority, whatever else it removed from him’ *(Fisher 1990: 421)*. For example, the title of Resident was, in itself, an attempt to deal with the problem that the East India Company ‘[a]s a chartered company […] could not deal with Indian sovereigns on the basis of de jure equality’ *(ibid. 430)*. By naming their envoy resident rather than ambassador they circumvented trying enquiries about the East India Company’s dual status as a corporation and empire-maker; and, equally important, it meant that its representatives ‘did not clearly fit into any of the extant Mughal diplomatic categories’ *(ibid. 431)*. Up until the disposal of the Mughal Emperor in 1857, ‘the Company formally acknowledged’ both ‘Mughal sovereignty’ and ‘the sovereignty of the British crown’ *(ibid. 430)*. This all changed in 1858, when ‘the British, who had started their rule as “outsiders”, became “insiders” by vesting in their monarch the sovereignty of India’ *(Cohn 2012|1983]: 165)*.

### Staging Empire

In Cohn we find two, if read in conjunction, misleading depictions of how the colonial state attained concrete embodiment and visibility. He writes that ‘[i]n the premodern state […] power was made visible through theatrical displays, in the form of processions, progresses, royal entries,
coronations, funerals, and other rituals that guaranteed the well-being and continued powers of the rulers over the ruled’ and that Indians, by the British, were regarded as particularly ‘susceptible to [such] show and drama’ (1996: 3, 125). Even though this is, evidently, not intended to imply that Indians were part of another time, deprived of history, it implicitly suggests that British and princely rule in 19th century India were, to a certain extent, ‘pre-modern’ in character. On the contrary, it seems more apt to describe British investment in portraying ‘the power of ritual [as] uniquely appealing to the “native mind”’ (Trevithick 1990: 562) as at the heart of 19th century empire-making. Ritual, after all, ‘was good value for money’ (ibid. 563; see also Cannadine 2002[2001]).

Brinda Roy has similarly stated—and, hence, further countered renderings of pomp and pageantry as archaic—that ‘[b]y the late 1870s [...] the mid-nineteenth century belief that there was really no need to show off when imperial power was assured yielded to the late-nineteenth century sense of a beleaguered Empire and a Nation in crisis’ (2001: 3). There was, thus, a novel urgency, which reached its apex at the end of the 19th century, to present and make the British Empire tangible through the carrying out of ‘ritualistic, ceremonial, public spectacle[s]’ (ibid. 40). British notions, as referred to above, that ‘in the East “splendour is a necessary accompaniment to power”’ (Kaul 2006: 468) and that ‘ceremony [...] if organized around a royal presence, or around some insignia of royal presence, was by nature attractive to the oriental mind’ (Trevithick 1990: 567) ought to be seen as expressions of this, rather than as indicating different stages of state-making.

The British, as the self-styled paramount power, were undoubtedly engaged in a constant staging of their empire (see Barringer 2006: 170)—one that evolved and, as the 19th century progressed, became more intricately interwoven with expressions of authority and political geography particular to the Indian Subcontinent. For instance, as the inaugural Viceroy of India, Lord Canning, from 1858, embarked on ‘a series of extensive tours’ that ‘had as one of their main features durbars [...] at which honours and rewards were presented to Indians who had demonstrated loyalty’ at the time of the Mutiny (Cohn 2012[1983]: 167). At the centre of such ceremonies were the princely rulers, who—as seen above—were turned to as a ‘natural aristocracy’ and as ‘feudatories’. They were, moreover, made to epitomise and personify ‘the romance of India as it had been constructed in the imaginations of the British people’ (Teten 2003: 274).
We find corresponding tendencies during the Prince of Wales’ tour of India and Ceylon in 1875-76. The princely rulers were, once more, consistently placed ‘at center stage’ and they effectively filled the function of displaying that ‘the Indian present was the European past’. thereby, it seems, substantiating the broader narrative and imagery that that India was still ‘feudal’ whereas European states had ‘advanced out of this stage’ (Cohn 1996: 121, 125). In the British press, the tour was depicted in ways that ‘reinforced the image of the British as modernizers and reformers, and tended to represent Indian and Cingalese cultures as static rather than dynamic, by emphasizing traditional entertainment and historical sites’ (Hahn 2009: 186). A third example of the conscious staging of empire as affording unity, stability and, under the right circumstances, possible progress is how durbars were not only held on an all-India basis and stage. Parallel to the imperial durbars of 1903 and 1911, ‘local durbars took place’ across British India; Haynes also refers to how ‘[a]round 1905 the district administration began to hold an annual durbar in Surat’ (1991: 132), which ought to suggest that this was the case in many other localities.

The Non-Durbar at the End of Empire

There was, between 1936-38, intense correspondence between the Viceroy, the Marquess of Linlithgow, and the Secretary of State for India, the Marquess of Zetland, regarding the prospect and need of arranging an imperial durbar in Delhi. The durbar was expected to equal a parallel event to the coronation of Edward VIII and, after his abdication in December 1936, his brother George VI that was planned to take place in London in May 1937. The Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India agreed on the great appeal of a royal visit, and that it was necessary that it took place not long after the actual coronation ceremony.

In a letter written in September 1936, Linlithgow wrote that

\[\text{the tradition of the Moghuls, the underlying principles of the great religions professed by the inhabitants of the sub-continent, who wish to be able to pay personal homage, in His own Empire, to an Emperor of India on his accession, all combine to make the wish of the Princes and peoples of India for the signal honour of a Durbar attended by His Majesty in person a very real one. (MSS EUR F125/139)}\]
Here, the Viceroy emphasised the traditional basis and local origin of the durbar form and its ritual(ising) substance as well as the particular significance of person-centred rule in British as well as Princely India—hence repeating the underpinning rationales for the earlier imperial durbars. The Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh, who had served as Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes between 1926 and 1931, had seconded this assessment already in May 1936 when he wrote that ‘there is likely to be a very great and genuine disappointment in India […] if His Imperial Majesty does not visit his Indian Empire for the Durbar announcing his Coronation’, and ‘I know it as a matter of fact that the Princes of India are looking forward with enthusiasm to the Royal visit’ (ibid.).

In the end, however, the imperial durbar was never held, which has led Trevithick to designate it a ‘non-Durbar’ and to identify two main reasons why the idea was abandoned, viz. (1) the shaky financial health of India and the empire in general, and (2) the vexing difficulty of gauging public opinion during a time when the “native mind” was being wooed by Gandhi and the Congress (1990: 575). It is noteworthy that George VI—shortly after having assumed the position as King in early December 1936—made, what turned out to be, a very short-lived and, within a few days, relinquished commitment to the Secretary of State for India that ‘Their Imperial Majesties hope to visit India in the course of next winter for the purpose of holding a Coronation Durbar’ (MSS EUR Fr25/139).

In January 1937, the correspondence between the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India, in evident contrast to this, contains a reference to how the King had expressed being ‘overwhelmed with the task which had been thrust upon him’, which, consequently, made it unwise to commit to a royal visit in India shortly after the coronation ceremony in London. To Trevithick’s insistence that the main considerations, that, in 1938, led to the durbar’s definite cancellation, were related to imperial finances and the increasing importance of the Indian independence movement, we ought to add the ones conveyed by the King’s representative to the Secretary of State for India in late January 1937, i.e. ‘the King’s medical advisers[1]’ opposition to ‘a programme involving a nervous strain’ and ‘that boons—political or material—would be expected in connection with a Royal Durbar and that great disappointment and possibly resentment would be aroused by their absence’ (ibid.).
A noteworthy facet of the early preparations was Linlithgow’s insistence that the royal visit should not include an extensive tour and that ‘the King should “come to India by air”’ (Trevithick 1990: 576). In concordance with the aforementioned tendency to conceive of ‘native mentality’ as a distinct phenomenon and category, Linlithgow suggested that “a descent from the sky would be likely to appeal irresistibly to the imagination of the Indian people” (ibid.). However, the Governor of Bombay, Sir Roger Lumley, objected to this. Not on the basis of disagreeing with the portrayal of the impact such an arrival in Delhi would have on Indian audiences, but with reference to how it would depart from, over the years, sedimented practices and expectations. Lumley wrote that ‘[i]f a royal visit does take place, Bombay would be greatly offended if Their Majesties did not land at the Gateway of India. Since every Royal visitor and every Viceroy, in the past, has entered India through Bombay, it would be extremely difficult to justify to Bombay any departure from this custom [...]’ (MSS EUR F253/14). Edward VIII himself responded to the suggestion that he, if he went on a royal visit to India, should arrive by air by stating that ‘once he decided to go to India he might wish to extend his visit to other parts of the country’ and that ‘he would not contemplate holding a Durbar in a ringed fence with applauding troops, police and officials with a sprinkling of the public carefully selected inside the ring and a disdainful and angry mob outside’ (MSS EUR F125/139). There was, thus, reluctance on the part of the British monarch already from the outset.

What seems to have, eventually, made the Viceroy less wedded to and enthusiastic about the idea of a royal visit were the responses given by provincial governors on what they perceived as the benefits and disadvantages of holding an imperial durbar. In November 1937, Linlithgow wrote to the Secretary of State for India ‘that we shall not be justified on the material available to us in advising His Majesty to visit India next year’ (ibid.). For instance, Harry Graham Haig, Governor of the United Provinces, had informed him that ‘I start from the position that unless a Royal visit is to be a real success, it will be a real disaster. [...] [A] Royal visit which was not successful would [...] do an immense amount of harm and would tend to shake the position of the Crown in India and the traditionally loyal attitude of the masses’ (MSS EUR F115/9). Haig continued by asserting ‘that unless there is a definite assurance that the Congress Ministers will attend the Darbar, then the Darbar should not be held’ (ibid.). We find similar sentiments expressed in a statement to the Governor of Bombay made by A.C.J. Bailey, Deputy
Inspector General of Police in Poona, who wrote that ‘the prospects in a year’s time of sincere co-operation on the part of local Governments or even comparative political tranquillity are not bright’ (MSS EUR F253/14). To support this claim, he pointed to a resolution that had been adopted by the Indian National Congress in December 1936, according to which ‘[t]he Congress […] has for many years followed a policy of not participating in any way in any celebrations or functions that might be held in connection with the new King’s Coronation and trust that the Nation will abstain from participation in all such functions’ (ibid.). This fear, at the end of empire, of a hollow ceremony and a breach of the durbar as symbolic form was the principal reason why there was no final repetition of the imperial durbars of 1877, 1903 and 1911.

Conclusion

What this paper, in sum, has demonstrated is that the durbar, as a symbolic form and ritualised space creatively employed by the British, ought to be conceived of as a site of negotiation—particularly in relation to the disparate and dissonant notions of bureaucracy that were played out within arrangements referred to as durbars or, at least, durbar-like settings. Within the ritualised (and ritualising) context of the durbar, the British represented themselves both as ‘gift-exchangers’ or ‘almsgivers’ and as neutral and ‘distant’ civil servants. The durbar, in British hands, thus allowed for the continued entanglement of ritual time and work time, while only half-heartedly promoting a new set of civic values meant to, at some future point, allow for a ‘representational mode of government’. At the same time, as the paper has tried to show, the bureaucratic encounters of the post-1857 British Indian Empire were in themselves spectacles that signified ‘dramatic confirmation’ of ‘deference’ and of a ‘common ethical ground’ between British representatives and imperial subjects.

A focus on British imperial usage of the durbar, furthermore, points to the continuity and constant appropriation of ways in which authority was legitimised, exercised and projected, which is noteworthy given the strong trend not long before 1877—when the first imperial durbar took place—to fully annex and entirely eliminate local polities. Instead, the British ended up protecting and buttressing princely rule as well as adopting, although in a modified shape, the sovereign expressions of the
‘feudatories’ and ‘natural aristocrats’. Even, it seems fair to argue, placing the Princes at the forefront of empire-making. Here the British could, with the durbar as a symbolic resource, lay claim to empire-making as equalling a ‘unifying process’, i.e. that the British Empire enabled a unity that would otherwise fall apart and be unviable. In this representation of the durbar, key roles were assigned to the Princes as part of a need to display and substantiate unity. What the overall effort to exhibit elements of continuity and the specific appropriation of the durbar, moreover, testify to and affirm is the need, while engaging in state-making, to search for and point to ‘foundations’. In the specific case of the imperial durbars, it was a search that was bound up with justifying an empire that was clearly not devoted to ‘reform’ and ‘improvement’. As seen above, past imperial formations and claims to civilisation, but also Delhi as such, were afforded special significance in bringing about and confirming continuity and a viable foundation for and origin of British imperial undertakings.

Finally, an evident benefit of attending to all three imperial durbars, as well as the ‘non-Durbar’ of 1936-38, is that they effectively mark changes to and differences in how imperial rule was conceived, exercised and related back to parallel state-making efforts in Britain. A concrete example of the latter is the interesting question, briefly touched upon above, of how British officials reacted to the King acting as a sovereign in 1911 and how this compares with the status attributed to the British monarch in 1877 and 1903, respectively; another the radical shift in the 1930s from a British emphasis on the Princes as key players in upholding empire to a new-found obsession with the Congress as undermining British presence in South Asia. In relation to the first point, a fruitful avenue for further exploration presents itself in the form of the perceived relationship between the Viceroy, as the new ‘locus of authority’, and the British monarchs.

A third promising object of enquiry is to probe how the imperial durbars—with their display of what Clifford Geertz refers to as ‘the material embodiment of political order’ that, in turn, effectuates ‘a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence’ (1980: 13)—were enacted in parallel to ideas of India as an ‘open-air museum’, and the perceived need to preserve traces of British presence and achievement, which, as Curzon feared and the Mutiny had proven, was susceptible to being easily erased. The latter was of course an impression that intersected with wrongly held assumptions of Indians as lacking ‘history’
and more correctly informed notions of the British, and their projected
paramountcy, as being of partial and momentary importance.

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