‘A Right Royal Tamasha’: Imaging Queen Victoria as Kaiser-i-Hind

MALVINA POLLOCK KALIM

This article examines the elevation of Queen Victoria to Empress of India through the prism of John Tenniel’s satirical cartoon ‘New Crowns for Old Ones’ and Val Prinsep’s commemorative painting of the proclamation ceremony in Delhi in 1877. It explores the invented traditions and rituals, fashioned from India’s imagined past and a medievalist aesthetic, that gave political raison d’être to the new title in India and configured the loyalty and legitimacy of the rulers of the Indian princely states to reinforce imperial regime. It looks in particular at how the selected artefacts formed and manipulated perceptions of empire and imaged Victoria’s paramount power.

On New Year’s Day 1877 over 100,000 participants and spectators gathered in Delhi to hear Queen Victoria proclaimed Kaiser-i-Hind, the official translation, selected after much deliberation, of her newly minted title of Empress of India. The ceremony was the culmination of a two-week long pageant that would be the first of three grand ceremonials in Delhi in honour of the British sovereign; the others in 1903 and 1911 formalized the coronations of Victoria’s successors, Edward VII and George V. It has gone down in history as the ‘Proclamation Durbar’ but its principal architect, the Viceroy Lord Lytton, called it an Imperial Assemblage ‘because it will materially and essentially differ from all previous Durbars, besides being on a much larger scale’.1 Privately he referred to it as ‘our great Tamasha’, which is also how the majority of Victoria’s Indian subjects most probably described it.2 A Hindustani word, derived from Persian, a ‘tamasha’ is a spectacle, a theatrical entertainment, a veritable commotion.

The proclamation ceremony was officially commemorated in Val Prinsep’s group portrait entitled The Imperial Assemblage. This vast, 723 centimetre long, 305 centimetre high painting includes over 150 recognizable personages, took three years to complete, forced the artist to enlarge his Holland Park studio to accommodate the canvas and occupied an entire wall of the Royal Academy when it was exhibited in 1880. It was one of the most expensive and prestigious commissions ever granted by the Indian colonial government: Prinsep received £10,000 in fee and expenses, roughly equivalent to £250,000 today. The painting was a gift to Victoria from the Indian princes, with the names of the subscribers engraved around the frame, and in her day it adorned the walls of Buckingham Palace. Still in the Royal Collection the painting now hangs, a relic of lost empire and largely forgotten, in the Banqueting Hall at St. James Palace.

When Victoria emerged from a fifteen-year period of mourning to express the desire for the title of Empress she was totally unprepared for the storm of criticism it unleashed. Objection to the proposal was vehement and the Royal Titles Act had a difficult passage before Parliament approved it, by a slender majority, in April 1876, on condition the new title applied only to India. To British ears the appellation evoked despotic powers in Napoleonic France and Russia and practices entirely contrary to the democratic spirit enshrined in the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. Could the dignity of the Crown be enhanced by an imperial title? The Liberal Opposition claimed it would be ‘electroplating.’ Stripped to fundamentals the acrimonious debate reflected divergent Tory and Liberal views on foreign policy and the contradictions inherent in reconciling metropolitan democracy with the justification for overt imperial rule abroad.

The impetus for elevation of the Queen’s title was widely believed to come from her Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli: a manifestation of his own grandiose designs. He had after all declared the imposition of Crown rule in India in 1858 merely ‘an anti-chamber to an imperial palace’. The truth was more nuanced. The Queen’s desire for an imperial title to match those of other European rulers had been suggested as early as 1843. Britain’s purchase of Suez Canal shares coupled with the rapid extension of the sub-continent’s railway and telegraph system had brought India closer. This raised expectations of integration and increased status among Indian rulers who had hailed the Prince of Wales as ‘our future Emperor’ during his official visit to India in 1875. Nevertheless, Disraeli’s perceived fascination with the trappings of empire fuelled a strident critique and outpouring of articles and images with overt, anti-Semitic, overtones exemplified in John Tenniel’s cartoon ‘New Crowns for Old Ones! (Aladdin Adapted) published in Punch in April 1876.

---

3 The Royal Titles Bill was presented to the House of Commons on 17 Feb. 1876. Debates in both chambers of the British parliament took place from February until April 1876.
The cartoon depicts a turbaned Disraeli as the power-seeking sorcerer Abanazar, from the story of Aladdin, trading a gaudy piece of domed oriental headgear in return for the English crown Victoria holds in her hands. The title parodies the cries of itinerant Jewish peddlers who roamed the city streets collecting old clothes to sell and draws attention to Disraeli’s origins. The Queen is portrayed as victim to Disraeli’s beguiling charms and the kabalistic magic hidden in the box of tricks he holds. The notion that Disraeli’s ethnicity was linked to hocus-pocus politics and a ‘conjuring’ political agency that could simultaneously master mass democracy and imperial expansion had wide currency. He was the alien ‘other’, the manipulative mountebank ready to bargain away the nation’s authentic English identity to put into reality his own exotic vision:

Figure 2. John Tenniel, ‘New Crowns for Old Ones’ (Aladdin Adapted), Punch, v. [33.84], 15 April 1876, [pp. 76-77]. © Punch.

Let the Queen of the English collect a great fleet, let her stow away all her treasure, bullion, gold plate, and precious arms; be accompanied by all her court and chief people, and transfer the seat of her empire from London to Delhi.8

Victoria is hesitant to surrender the traditional, modest, English crown that befits the sovereign of a liberal democracy for the far more ornate Indian one of Bahadur Shah.9 Her reticence reflects widespread concern over corrupting influences that would either degrade her as the successor to a weak and degenerate Mughal ruler or encourage her to turn into an ‘Eastern potentate’.

Constitutionally, Victoria had been monarch of India since 1858 when the East India Company was dissolved, following the seismic upheavals of 1857. The uprising had made plain the 600 or so princes and chiefs who ruled over two fifths of India, some with states larger than Britain, and who had, by and large, opposed the rebels, must be embraced.10 The Government of India Act of 1858 unveiled a new doctrine of imperial rule in which the princes became central to British Indian polity. It was a marriage of convenience that would endure for ninety years, until independence and partition. The Royal Titles Act was a reaffirmation of the desire to bind together the Indian people and princes in common and personal loyalty to Victoria and further consolidate and popularize British rule.11 It also served notice to the world that Britain was now an imperial power and to subjects at home that Victoria was not affected by the derisive outcry of a minority in Parliament.

The pageant in Delhi was primarily the creation of Lord Lytton, son of Disraeli’s friend and mentor, Bulwer Lytton, and an unlikely but fortuitous choice of Viceroy, selected only after three other candidates turned down the position.12 Scion of a family whose lineage traced back to the Crusaders, a poet, under the nom de plume Owen Meredith, and seduced by India, a land multidinous in its traditions;

From whose sun-bright womb,
Sprang giants which are no more.13

A dandy, in the Baudelaire mode, with a theatrical persona to match Disraeli’s, he would be widely criticized for his handling of famine relief, his crackdown on the vernacular press and failed policies during the Second Afghan War. But, this new Viceroy was perfectly suited to the task of imaging Victoria as Kaiser-i-Hind with utmost pomp and magnificence.14

The ‘pseudo-medieval’ extravaganza that Lytton designed was rooted in a feudal vision of Indian society where: ‘from the remotest antiquity the Rajas and princes of India have

---

9 Mirza Abu Zafar Sirajuddin Muhammad Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor. Deposed by the British in 1857 and exiled to Burma.
10 Barbara Ramusack, The Indian Princes and Their States (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 84-85.
12 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, novelist, playwright and politician, 1803-1873.
13 Owen Meredith, Lucile, Part I, canto VI, verse XXV.
14 Charles Baudelaire, Le peintre de la vie moderne (Paris, 1863), defined a dandy as ‘one who elevated aesthetics to a living religion’.
assembled to celebrate the establishment of a new empire ---. The story of such gatherings is
told in the earliest traditions of the two famous Hindu epics, the Ramayana and
Mahabharata’. This construction enabled Britain to claim the legitimacy that longevity
could impart and to demonstrate the superiority of its own advancement from the feudal
state, thereby justifying its control over India’s future. It was also an aesthetic that chimed
with Victorian Britain’s own neo-gothic ideals for a stable society.

Prinsep’s painting (fig. 1) depicts the proclamation ceremony held on New Year’s Day 1877.
The focal point is the red and gold hexagonal throne pavilion, where the Viceroy is seated,
beneath a large portrait of the Queen-Empress, wearing the mantle of the Grand Master of
the order of the Star of India: Lady Lytton and their daughters beside him. The princes,
representatives of foreign governments and distinguished British officials face him, attired in
ornate native costume, dress uniforms or the blue mantle of the Indian order of knighthood.
Forming the backdrop are the large armorial banners of the sixty-three most illustrious
princes in attendance, presented to each of them by the Viceroy prior to the ceremony, to
signify the personal bond between the Queen-Empress and the prince. The fanfare has
sounded and the Chief Herald, Major Barnes, said to be the tallest man in the British army,
is reading the proclamation.

Though massive, the painting fails to do justice to the size and scale of the scene. The centre
of the amphitheatre’s arc appears to be about thirty feet from the throne pavilion: in fact it
was 226 feet. Similarly, each hexagonal side of the throne pavilion was forty feet wide, not
six, as the picture suggests. The overall decoration was elaborate in the extreme. Like
Diocletian, Lytton believed ‘ostentation of splendour and luxury could subjugate the
imagination of the multitude.’ Disraeli, not known for moderation, found the proclamation
schemes read like The Thousand and One Nights and felt compelled to rein in some excessive
flights of fancy. Prinsep, clearly daunted by his task, declared; ‘Oh Horror! What have I to
paint? A kind of thing that out does the Crystal Palace in hideosity … Never was such a
brummagem ornament, or more atrocious taste’.

The ceremony has been read as a traditional Mughal durbar denuded of its central element,
the gift exchange: nazār (gold coins) offered by the one being honoured and khilat (clothes)
given by Mughal to signal incorporation into his body. Prinsep’s painting reveals Lytton
staged it as an investiture into a chivalric order of knighthood, with attendant rituals of
homage and incorporation. The pillars supporting the throne pavilion are decorated with
the colours and insignia of the prestigious British orders of knighthood of which the Exalted

---

15 J. Talboys Wheeler, The History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi. Including historical sketches of India and
her princes past and present (London, 1877).
18 Disraeli to Lord Salisbury, 3 Sept. 1876, in W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, Life of Benjamin
Order of the Star of India, instituted in 1861, ranked fourth.\(^{21}\) The distinctive blue, white and gold colours of the order and its star-shaped insignia are a dominant design motif of the decoration. Victoria, like her predecessors, recognized the desirable political effect of chivalric orders to forge bonds of loyalty, and conciliated the princes with this and other hierarchical trappings like gun salutes.

The Viceroy’s elevated throne affirms his sovereign as the paramount power. At his feet, the ornate dress and extravagant jewels of the princes flaunt their wealth and lineage but also demarcate the ornate Indian body as ‘an imperial masquerade’.\(^{22}\) The banners say it all. At the apex the Imperial Crown of Henry VIII who declared his kingdom an empire, not subject to the authority of any other power. Beneath it the insignia of the ‘Star of India’ with its legend ‘Heaven’s light our Guide,’ and below the name of the recipient over whom the protection of the British sovereign is extended and from whom the oath of loyalty is demanded.

Despite the feudal imagery there is little ‘oriental’ in the construct: only the riot of colour from the juxtaposition of native costumes and British uniforms gives the illusion it may be so. Traditional durbar halls were rectangular, and the seating precedent strictly defined. Here the amphitheatre, designed by Gangaram, is a democratic semi-circle with the princes all seated equidistant from the throne, thereby levelled and united as a collective body.\(^{23}\) British mores prevailed. Lytton refused to conform ‘to the standard of those whose masters we are by reason of our superior social enlightenment’ and overturned protocol denying female members of the Vice-regal family the right to attend state functions for fear of offending high-ranking natives.\(^{24}\) ‘I have been more brought forward than any lady yet in India’, Lady Lytton recorded in her dairy.\(^{25}\) The Begum of Bhopal, the sole female ruler in India, was similarly ‘brought forward’, and seated directly in front of the throne, her blue ‘Star of India’ mantle mirroring the Viceroy’s.\(^{26}\)

The initial reaction to the Imperial Assemblage was largely negative. The eyewitness account telegraphed to the *London Times* of 2 January 1877 described it as a mixture of splendour and squalor, exacerbating British concerns of being ‘infected’ by oriental notions and an exotic and dangerous empire that, thanks to modern technology, now seemed dangerously close to home.\(^{27}\) In India criticism focused on the gross misuse of public funds at a time the country was ravaged by famine. *Punch*, had a field day satirizing Disraeli and Lytton’s ‘pantomime’

\(^{21}\) In order of precedence: The Garter, the Thistle, the St. Patrick and the Star of India.
\(^{23}\) A graduate of Roorkee College of Civil Engineering: founded by the British administration in 1847. He became one of Lahore’s richest and most generous philanthropists.
\(^{26}\) Begum Shah Jehan, the second successive ruler of Bhopal to be invested as a Knight Commander of the Star of India. Her mother, Begum Sikander, received this honour at the first investiture in 1861.
and when Prinsep’s painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy the art establishment’s consensus was ‘the tinselled ceremony was a fiasco artistically’.28

Over time Lytton was vindicated. The invented traditions of his ‘Assemblage’ became the template for subsequent coronation durbars and elements are still recognizable today when Britain ‘puts on a show’. In India he was credited in some quarters with fostering the first nascent strands of national unity and the armorial arms live on as the state emblems of several modern-day Indian states.29 When Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee in 1897 Britain declared it ‘a celebration of Empire’ and she went to her service of thanksgiving escorted by a troop of Indian cavalry. By then Victoria Regina Imperatrix, the title deemed ‘for external use only’ was on every coin of the realm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY MANUSCRIPT SOURCES


British Library, Asian and African Studies MSS EUR 218, Papers of 1st Earl Lytton as Viceroy of India 1876 - 1880, the British Library.

British Library, India Office Records IOR/Z/L/PS/7, Political and Secret Correspondence with India.


PRIMARY PRINTED SOURCES


Disraeli, Benjamin, Tancred or The New Crusade, 1847 (London: John Lane, 1927).

28 Illustrated London News (1 May 1880).

Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, 1876-1878.

The Illustrated London News (1876-1880).


The Times (1858-1877).


SECONDARY SOURCES


Ramusack, Barbara, The Indian Princes and their States (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).


LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Val. C. Prinsep, *The Imperial Assemblage* 1877-1880, oil on canvas 304.8 x 723 cm, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016

Figure 2. John Tenniel, ‘New Crowns for Old Ones’ (*Aladdin Adapted*), Punch, v. [33.84], 15 April 1876, [pp. 76-77]. © Punch.