Empire Communications, Inc.

Nineteenth-Century Imperial Pageantry and the Politics of Display

Pramod K. Nayar

Abstract
The essay examines two specific instances of imperial spectacles: the 1877 imperial durbar in Delhi and the 1911 Pageant of Empire in London. It argues that these spectacles enabled the Empire to incorporate the natives as subjects into the symbolic hierarchies of the Raj, and the English into an imperial sensibility of ownership and shared destiny. It suggests that through these spectacles the power and majesty of the Empire was conveyed to their subjects but also to their own countrymen in the form of an imperial improvisation. In the case of the Delhi durbar imperial improvisation was made possible through the participatory nature of the spectacle where the native princes and aristocrats, by participating in the Durbar, implicitly endorsed it, accepted it as 'Indian', and located themselves within the imperial structure. The 1911 Pageant was an aesthetic spectacle that forged a sense of connection, for all English visitors to see themselves as a part of the large 'British' imperial family and served the educational purpose of introducing the empire’s possessions.

Keywords
1877 Delhi Durbar, 1911 London Pageant, spectacle, imperial improvisation, English identity

Introduction
Empires achieve domination, surely, through military might and political stratagems. However, for empires to be truly effective in effecting domination consistently and for a longer period, it is not enough to demonstrate military superiority. Power must be communicated to the subjects, who must concede to become subjects. This essay argues that British colonial dominance over India in the nineteenth century was achieved partly through an effective communication of British authority, a communication made possible through a set of imperial spectacles. I am here following the lead given by scholars like Bernard Cohn (1983) who have demonstrated the significance of the British durbars (1877, 1911) in the imperial scheme of things. It proposes that these spectacles might be treated as exercises in both political and social communication. They are acts of political communication because they further the meaning of racialized ruler–ruled hierarchies. They constitute social communication because they appropriate aesthetic forms of display that draw upon social and cultural practices and codes.
Objectives and Conceptual Framework

This essay proposes that it was not enough to show Indians that Britain ruled over India: it was also necessary for the Britons back home to feel a sense of imperial identity, destiny and responsibility. The latter was possible when the empire was staged as a spectacle within England. Together, the London pageants and the Indian durbars became, the essay suggests, the spectacle of Empire itself.

To this end, the essay ‘reads’ the 1877 Delhi durbar and the 1911 Pageant of London. Detailed accounts of the durbar survive in the form of Talboys Wheeler’s *The History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi* (1982) and SC Lomas’ *Festival of Empire: Souvenir of the Pageant of London* (1911). For this purpose I examine the discourses embedded in these key texts—discourses of empire, self-improvisation and exhibition. It assumes that these commentaries on the events are textual enunciations that encode the discourses of Empire. Discourse is the context of representation, knowledge and understanding. It defines what can be said, studied and the processes of doing so. It is the context in which meaning itself is produced. The sequence of events of the Durbars could be analyzed in its visual (photographs, portraits and paintings), physical (the embodied events) or textual manifestations. This essay examines the last mode, with the premise that a reading of encoded discourses should reveal the power relations at work there (as discourse studies expect to do).

The essay shows how an imperial improvisation was underway when the English made use of the Mughal durbar in order to (i) demonstrate their ‘natural’ right to be in India and (ii) incorporate Indians into this imperial structure. When a similar spectacle was staged in London, it was also an act of improvisation where the English saw themselves within the spectacle as participating in the act of Empire. The Pageant of London, therefore, was an important step in generating a sense of English identity amongst the English.

Discussion

Staging Imperial Relations

Empire management and imperial dominance demanded a more sophisticated discourse, and an aura, whereby the European’s power would appeal on the basis of its magnificence and glamour would appear natural and would fit into something the colonized would recognize and therefore accept. It required, in other words, a significant spectacle that would highlight the glories of being British subjects. It was necessary for the native subjects to understand, and accept, the nature of the imperial relation.

This discourse of spectacle, magnificence and display is, I propose, perhaps the most fascinating feature of imperial Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The imperial culture of display built on visual cultures that had already gone some way in helping the English back in England, visualize India. As the work of Antoinette Burton (1998), Catherine Hall (2002) and others have shown, the distant colony was very much a part of English metropolitan culture in the Victorian period.

Panoramas of India had been exhibited in England since the early decades of the nineteenth century. The battles with Tipu Sultan, for example, were available for the British public to view when Robert Ker Porter’s ‘The Great Historical Picture of the Storming of Seringapatam’—2550 square feet of canvas—opened at the Lyceum theatre in the Strand in April 1800. The panorama, where the viewer got, literally, an elevated view of the painting, was closely aligned with the gaze of power, giving a sense of what
Michael Charlesworth terms ‘overlordship’ (2001). The English man or woman could survey, from a vantage point, the scene laid out in what is a visual appropriation of the distant space of India. This visual discourse, I propose, introduces the idea of an imperial spectacle to the British public where scenes from India, with all their gory (in scenes of battles, as viewers of Porter’s panorama recorded, see Daniel White 2010), melancholic or triumphant features could be recorded and experienced. The English viewer was a sovereign gazing over his ‘possessions’. From the centre of the empire—London—the viewer was able to ‘absorb’ India through realistic and vast canvases. India was, in other words, colonized through the visual medium well before the advent of photography or the ‘India museum’ of the later Victorian period.

The Prince of Wales had visited India in 1875–76 and sent back many artefacts from the subcontinent. Indian princes were visitors at Victoria’s court and, John MacKenzie notes, she was surrounded by objects and paintings that reminded her of her Asiatic imperial role (MacKenzie 2001: 248). Imperial and colonial exhibitions went a long way in introducing this colony to the British public. In 1886 the Colonial and Indian exhibition and in 1897 the Imperial Victorian Exhibition, were both held in London. But as early as the 1862 London Exhibition the Empire had figured prominently, with 7000 Indian exhibits. The objective of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1884 was, according to its official write-up, ‘to give to the inhabitants of the British Isles, to foreigners and to one another practical demonstration of the wealth and industrial development of the outlaying portions of the British Empire (cited in MacKenzie 1984: 101). And the stated aim of the 1911 Crystal Palace Exhibition was ‘to demonstrate to the somewhat casual, often times unobservant British public the real significance of our great self-governing Dominions, to make us familiar with their products, their ever-increasing resources, their illimitable possibilities’ (cited in MacKenzie 1984: 106). Imre Kiralfy’s company, London Exhibitions Ltd., had its first major event in the Empire of India Exhibition of Earl’s Court, 1895, followed by similar annual events on imperial themes (including one on ‘Savage South Africa’ in 1899). The spectacles of an imperial progress were not, therefore, new to the British public.

However, from the mid-nineteenth century it was felt that some display of Britain’s imperial powers was necessary for Indians as well. Young Englishmen who came out to India as part of the Civil Service were told that, while in India, ‘he lives among a race who are peculiarly sensitive to external pomp and circumstance’ (Monthly Magazine 4 [1861]: 264). Writing in Charles Dickens’ Household Words, a commentator described the ritual of dispensing justice to the natives in India: ‘The magistrate in his own chair, on a platform raised a couple of feet from the ground, so as to give him a view of the Court, and impress the spectators with just notions of his exalted position…’ (HW 7 [1853]: 397). To ‘impress’ the natives meant to communicate to them the glory of the Empire, but also its hierarchies and segregationist policies so that they were made aware of rank, class and racial differences.

The structure of this display was, as Jan-Georg Deutsch analyzing the display of colonial power in the magistrate’s work in Tanzania has called it, a ‘political and moral theatre’ in which the natives were mere spectators (Deutsch 2002: 94). This theatre was a play of symbols, of course. What British India needed was a symbolic representation of its imperial—military, political, economic and cultural—role in India. Dominance and authority needed to be seen in the form of symbols and representations, especially after 1857. After 1857 and the uprising, the British systematically set about demonstrating their power by imposing imperial spectacles on the Indian landscape. As we have noted, the railway lines and road works cut through the Indian bazaar, towns and princely states reorganizing space, while also serving as visual reminders of the imperial presence.

In most of these cases the spectacle of empire facilitated not just this visual reminder but also a clever ‘improvisation’. In, for example, the architectural experiments of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the
British tried to appropriate native styles and graft European styles onto them. Imperial spectacles in buildings, gardens and, most distinctively, in assemblages were spatial, geographical and dramatic embodiments of what we can think of as *imperial improvisation*. This imperial improvisation was made possible through the participatory nature of the spectacle where the native princes and aristocrats, by participating in the Durbar, implicitly endorsed it, accepted it as ‘Indian’, and located themselves within the imperial structure.

The colonial hunt which enabled a domestication of the colonial space was an improvisation because it appropriated native traditions of the Mughals and the native kings and converted it into means of generating imperial visibility, masculinity and character. The Calcutta Exhibition (1883–84) and Bombay Exhibition (1910) were attempts to display British India’s imperial character for the Indian subjects. But by far the most spectacular mode of imperial improvisation in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was the imperial assemblage or imperial *durbar*, first held in 1877.

By means of the Royal Titles Act of 1876 Victoria had been proclaimed ‘Empress of India’. Closely following this declaration was an event that served notice to both Indians and the rest of the world that Britain was now an imperial power. The native princes, hailed as the native aristocracy, were hereafter favoured by the British through a process, under the belief that they presented a ‘no inconsiderable guarantee for the stability of the Indian empire’ (cited in Cannadine 2001: 46).

It is my intention to hold at Delhi, on the 1st day of January 1877, an Imperial Assemblage, for the purpose of proclaiming to the Queen’s subjects throughout India the gracious sentiments which have induced Her Majesty to make to Her Sovereign Style and Titles and addition specially intended to mark Her Majesty’s interest in this great Dependency of Her Crown, and Her Royal confidence and affection of the Princes and Peoples of India.

To this Assemblage I propose to invite the Governors, Lieutenant-Governors, and Heads of Administrations, from all parts of the Queen’s Indian dominions, as well as those Princes, Chiefs, and Nobles, in whose Persons the antiquity of the past is associated with the prosperity of the present, and who so worthily contribute to the splendour and stability of this great Empire. (Wheeler 1982: xiii–xiv)

This is Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of British India, in his letter of August 1876 announcing his intention of holding the Imperial Assemblage. The Lytton letter is itself an excellent example of the discourse of control and dominance, cast in the language of spectacle, display and power. Talboys Wheeler’s *The History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi [1877]* (1982) offers the descriptive account of this display, seeking to capture the glory that was exhibited for the benefit of the Indians in 1877. The Indian past and the British imperial present were to be conjoined here in this event. The native princes ‘contribute to the splendour and stability of this great Empire’ in Lytton’s words by being present, by occupying their assigned roles and places in the spectacle and thereby gesturing to the world that they have inserted themselves into the imperial structure.

The event, writes Wheeler, is ‘an epoch in the history of India’, it ‘ratif[ies]’ the act of ‘the Queen of the British Isles assum[ing] the direct sovereignty of her eastern possessions’ (Wheeler 1982: 1). Yet, this is not what is fascinating about Wheeler’s account. What Wheeler does is to suggest that this grand display only continues an Indian tradition. He writes:

An Imperial Assemblage is one of the oldest institutions in India. From the remotest antiquity the Rajas and princes of India have assembled to celebrate the establishment of a new empire, or the accession of a new suzerain. The story of such gatherings is told in the earliest traditions of the two famous Hindu epics,—the Ramayana and Mahabharata …
There is no city in the British empire so fitted as Delhi for the assumption of the sovereignty of India. It is seated near one of the most ancient sites in all of India. (1–2)

He then notes that the ‘ancestral houses of all present [the princes present at the 1877 Assemblage] have appeared upon the stage at one or other of the great epochs in Indian annals’ (3–4). Finally, Wheeler writes:

One and all have played a part in history during the rise and growth of the British empire in India. Their traditions have thus become interwoven with those of the English people. Henceforth all the great events in the history of India, from the foundation of Indra-prastha to the Imperial Assemblage of 1877, ought to be known and appreciated wherever the English language is spoken throughout the world. (4)

Later, Wheeler would make the spectacle’s historical roots even more explicit:

An Imperial Assemblage was thus a happy opportunity of celebrating an important political and historical event. It was the one thing that the princes could thoroughly understand. It was the only thing wanting to establish the reality of the British empire in the hearts of the people of India as the representative of the imperial power which traces back its origins to Indra and the Sun. (45)

Wheeler’s rhetoric of display and historical roots suggest what may be termed an imperial improvisation. ‘Improvisation’ is the mode through which an individual seeks to enter into the power relations already in place (Greenblatt 1980). Identity, which is at the root of all improvisation, is created and reinforced through repeated performances. These performances take into account already existing ‘sets’, stages and events and enable the individual to insinuate her or himself—both British and Indian—into them.

The Imperial Assemblage replicated the Mughal durbar but with crucial differences. The Mughal durbar, which involved some gift exchanges that were symbolic and personal, enabled an ‘incorporation’ (Cohn 1983: 168). The personage who was to be honoured offered gold coins and gifts (called nazar) and the Mughal would present a khelat (a set of clothes, turbans, shawls, swords, but also, sometimes, elephants and horses). Through this the personage was deemed to have been incorporated into the body of the gift-giver, the Mughal. In the case of the Imperial Assemblage, this ritual was given an entirely different purpose and effect: the Indian ruler who was honoured with a title or a gun salute was being relocated into a system of ranking and hierarchy of other Indian rulers. That is, the British Viceroy was creating, as Bernard Cohn’s essay demonstrates, subordination rather than incorporation. ‘Imperial improvisation’ here is the use of native rituals and symbolism for a different effect. The British were insinuating themselves into the Mughal legacy, forging their own identities as inheritors of Mughal power. The spectacle of the Assemblage was therefore a dramatic performance where the shift in power was made visible. It was a performance that reinforced, in public,

1. the appropriation of a native tradition by the white ruler
2. the assimilation of native social hierarchies as a necessary support–structure for the imperial project
3. the difference between the rulers and ruled
4. the subordination of the local powers to the European one.
Part of this imperial improvisation was also given over to underscoring the European identity of the gift-giver. Wheeler thus calls attention to the non-native nature of the Assemblage when he writes:

There was nothing Oriental in these structures. They were not borrowed from any native designs … The gathering together of Native costumes and European uniforms somewhat changed the appearance of these pavilions … Every effort was made to mingle the Ruling Chiefs with European officials, so as to avoid questions of precedence which have excited bitterness and heartburn in India from the remotest antiquity. (p. 73)

Wheeler also distinguishes between the local Durbars and the imperial one. He claims:

Such assemblages [the native ones] were often little better than excuses for extortion. The princes and nobles of India were expected to impoverish themselves and their ryots in order to present gifts to the Padishah, the ministers and the favourites … At the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi it was arranged that the Viceroy would receive no presents; accordingly none were received, although many were given. (93–4)

Wheeler takes pains to show that the British durbar was significantly different in its non-exploitative nature from the native ones. Similar sentiments about the native durbars and rituals were, of course, common, as we can see in the following commentary in the British Foreign and Colonial Journal:

Those … who had … for years to direct and control Native Courts, were wont to look beyond the idle ceremonial and the glitter and the show to the dungeons where innocent men were rotting for years without a trial, to peasants tortured to extort impossible rents, to high officials in notorious league with bandits, and to corruption on every judgment seat … (BFCJ 1.3 [1889]: 18)

Like Wheeler, Disraeli, the British Prime Minister, also demonstrates an imperial improvisation. Announcing the ‘Empress of India’ title for Queen Victoria, Disraeli declared: ‘This vast community is governed under the authority of the Queen, by many Sovereign Princes, some of whom occupy thrones which were filled by their ancestors when England was a Roman province’ (Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates 3rd series, 227 [1876]: 4).

Disraeli was here locating India’s ancestral kingdoms within a new imperial order, even as he improvises British identity: the British identity now is one that has slipped into an ancient kingdom in India.

The cumulative effects of the Assemblage, according to Wheeler’s narrative, were several. It ‘yielded’ to native ideas and ‘elicited’ corresponding concessions. Ruling chiefs and notables forgot their feuds and became friends. They were ‘profuse in their professions of gratification at British supremacy’. Many donated money to famine-hit regions because ‘all attempted to associate the occasion with some public act’ (p. 89). The friendliness that Wheeler stresses was integral to the Assemblage belies the political field on which this entire game was being staged: every native king was vying for British honours, and the very idea of honouring the native kings with different gun salutes (the Appendix to Wheeler’s narrative lists the kings and the number of gun salutes each merited), worked to organize the natives hierarchically, and competitively positioned against each other. Here imperial improvisation works to achieve another effect: it positions the English authority/identity as one that can unify the natives, while acknowledging that Indian social hierarchies would find a position within the British imperial–social order.

Clearly, the Assemblage was an exercise in the visual domination of the country. The spectacle of empire here encodes several elements of the discourse of dominance and control. Wheeler, as one can see, naturalizes Britain’s imperial spectacle by showing how
1. India has always had a tradition of such spectacles,
2. The Indian princes participating in the 1877 pageantry have had a role in Indian history,
3. This event has precedents in India and therefore the arrival of a new sovereign is expected, by Indians, to initiate such a display,
4. This Assemblage of 1877 is an event not in British history but in Indian history.

Thus, pre-empting the charge that this Assemblage is just an instance of British history being enacted, Wheeler transforms it into an event in Indian history. This is imperial improvisation at its most spectacular: using a native ritual idiom, shifting its structures to incorporate European ones, re-aligning the characters in the ritual drama and, finally, imposing, symbolically, the signs and appurtenances of a British identity.

This suggests that Britain’s presence in India is no more alien or foreign, but an integral part of India’s history. What Wheeler does is to cleverly smuggle Victoria and the Britons into India’s past and present. Rather than treating it as an intrusive event, Wheeler makes the pageant another moment in a series—a series that is as Indian as the princes attending. Wheeler thus erases the foreign nature of the British empire, and ignores the supplicant or dependent nature of the Princes attending the Assemblage.

Wheeler also positions the Assemblage as a ‘peaceful’ event (p. 43), in a careful attempt to erase from memory the events of 1857–58. What we see is the attempt to reinvent the history of the British Empire by presenting it as a peaceful event, rather than a violent one which attracted dissent and resistance. There are other, more insidious elements of colonial discourse that occur in Wheeler’s account of the imperial spectacle. Wheeler suggests that, at the venue, the natives had to be kept apart from each other, or their old animosities based on rank and hierarchy would have resulted in battles right there. He also offers a moral function and effect of the spectacle: the native durbars were spectacles of extortion, the British one was one of benevolence and generosity.

The 1902 Delhi Durbar, choreographed by Lord Curzon, was both imitative of and a departure from the 1877 Assemblage. Curzon ordered an amphitheatre built with a canopy styled after a Saracenic dome. His stated aim was to avoid European styles and instead use Mughal–Saracenic forms. This in itself, as Thomas Metcalf points out, was a way of locating the British in India as successors to the Mughals (1989: 201). It had to give, wrote Curzon, the ‘illusion’ of a palatial Mughal structure (cited in Metcalf 1989: 201). The Durbar had to induce, wrote Curzon in a Memorandum of September 1902, a ‘sense of common participation in a great political system and of fellow citizenship of the British Empire’ (cited in Trevithick 1990: 567).

The Durbar’s investiture ceremonies were held in the Diwan-i-Aam of Shah Jahan’s Red Fort, once again emphasizing the British inheritance of the Mughal legacy. The Indian princes were to hand in their petitions to Lord Curzon who would sit, Emperor-like, in this Diwan-i-Aam, and thus recall the durbars of the Mughal kings. A parody of this Mughal history, Curzon effectively reinvented the authority and splendour of the Mughals: only this time, the authority was British and the Indians, supplicants. What we see here is a brilliant appropriative mechanism in the visual and dramatic vocabulary of empire. The Indian princes were not, as Curzon intended, mere spectators to Britain’s imperial glamour: they actively participated in it as supplicants and beneficiaries. He was to state these in unequivocal terms: ‘My one desire has been that the Indian Princes, instead of being mere spectators of the ceremony, as they were in 1877, should be actors in it’ (cited in Metcalf 1989: 202). This suggests cooptation of native social ranking into the fabric of Empire, and converts the Durbar into a participatory spectacle: the natives were ‘actors’ but with little agency, they were props, but had an important—and visible—function: sending the signal of the cooptation.
The Assemblage was drama, quite in keeping with what we have identified as ‘imperial improvisation’. There are the set pieces, the actors and the directors. The cultural dimension of colour, stage and salutes becomes a mechanism through which the native kings are incorporated into the structure of the empire. In other words, what I am proposing is that the imperial spectacle was not about British might alone, it was about the cooptation, the incorporation of the native powers into the larger structure that is the British Empire. This visual spectacle (and ritual) underscored racial difference and power relations. As Andrew Apter points out in the case of similar spectacles in colonial Nigeria (around the same time as the first Assemblage in Delhi), a ‘politics of perspective’ is in play here (Apter 2002: 572). The Europeans in the Imperial Assemblage took centre stage with daises and viewing platforms (as in the panorama described above)—the Viceroy sat on a ‘Throne Pavilion’ (Wheeler 1982: 71)—so that they could see everybody, and could be seen by everybody. It emphasized the ‘overlordship’ of the viewer, and ensured that the sovereign could be gazed upon and admired, applied to.

It at once levelled the native rulers into a homogeneous mass of rulers, even as the subsequent events—the gun salutes referred to earlier—divided them. This arrangement also meant that the native rulers were brought within the visual field of the Throne Pavilion on which the Viceroy of India presided. It also, however, assimilated Indian social orders and hierarchies into an Imperial set up, suggesting a cultivation of the local ranks for the stability of the British Empire. That is, by retaining the ranking within Indian society, the British hoped to ensure the support of the local rulers and feudal lords for their own Empire. The ritual of the durbar did not coerce the native rulers into specific positions; instead it involved a certain consensus (Trevithick 1990: 562), on the part of the native rulers. It produced a ‘citizenship of the British Empire’, in Curzon’s terms, through an enactment of ceremonial, ritual cultural citizenship.

Different rulers arranged neatly into sections offered a semblance of visual order of the empire itself. (Portraits of the rajas in their costumes in Wheeler’s account constituted a visual collection as well.) 6 There was a strict ceremonial order to be followed by the native Princes, from their arrival time to the sequence in which they, their carriages, their horses, their purdah-clad women and entourage would proceed, as the Official Directory of the 1911 Durbar insisted (pp. 13–20). Wheeler notes that the native rulers came in their bright finery, and there was a ‘display of oriental costumes and insignia’ but was interspersed with ‘British uniforms and banners’ (Wheeler 1982: 73). The arrangement of this spectacle suggested a token ‘political autonomy within a visual command’ (Apter 2002: 574). The entire Assemblage was a mechanism through which the native rulers were presented to a central viewing position, ‘viewed’ and officially recognized by the white sovereign. 7 It also appropriated an Indian ritual idiom, of the durbar, and gift exchange, but used it to produce a new identity for the Empire. It showed, in David Cannadine’s description of the 1911 Coronation Durbar of George V (in India), an ‘image of India protected and projected by the Raj—glittering, ceremonial, layered and traditional, princely and rural, Gothic and Indo–Saracenic’ (Cannadine 2001: 51). By co-opting the native princes the Empire not only demonstrated its protectionism of Indian social ranks, it also generated a ranking across racial ranks. The Proclamation for the 1911 Coronation Durbar announced this racial ranking clearly: ‘The said solemnity has so been celebrated and call to Our presence Our Governors, Lieutenant-Governors, and others of Our Officers, the Princes, Chiefs and Nobles of the Native States under Our protection’. (Coronation Durbar Delhi, Official Directory 1911: 2)

The Native Princes might be rulers in their states but, as the Proclamation makes clear, they are rulers under the ‘protection’ of the British Empire. The Native Princes endorse the imperial power and dominance by being part of the imperial spectacle—by suggesting to the other natives that the Empire

was acceptable and all right.\textsuperscript{8} It was, in Douglas Haynes’ terms, a ‘formal subordination to the Raj’ (Haynes 1990: 506).

There was one more development at the 1877 Assemblage. A group called the ‘Counsellors of the Empress’ was announced. The purpose, ostensibly, was for ‘seeking from time to time, in matters of importance, the counsel and advice of Princes and Chiefs of India, and thus associating them with the Paramount Power’ (as cited in Cohn 1983: 191). Co-opting Indian rulers and advisors into the structure was also, it could be argued, an act of imperial improvisation: it retained the native ruling class with little powers, but reinforced the British monarch’s authority. Here the monarch retains the position of the ‘Paramount Power’ but is actively supported by the local elites. The ‘political and moral theatre’ had served its purpose: it had affected a hierarchy, established the moral high-ground of justice and power, and reduced the natives, if not into spectators then into passive props for the imperial identity. The durbar was the stage where the imperial identity’s most auratic form was displayed.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{At Home in the Empire: Staging the Imperial City}

The imagination thrills at the thought of it—a great series of London Pageants, a vivid reproduction of historical scenes which will not only bring home to the citizens of London the historic greatness of their city, but will serve to shew in striking manner the important part it occupies as the centre of a world-wide Empire … The aim will be not merely to provide a pictorial and dramatic display which will please the eye without leaving any lasting impression, but to stimulate thought and imagination, and to demonstrate and remind us of the closeness of the associations which link the overseas dominions to the centre of British Imperial rule.

—\textit{Souvenir of the Pageant of London} (Lomas 1911, as cited in Deborah Ryan 1999: 117)

The Delhi Imperial Assemblage of 1877 was a spectacle where (i) the native princes endorsed the imperial power and dominance by being part of the imperial spectacle and (ii) the British converted their rule and presence into something natural and succeeding to the feudal and monarchic traditions of Indian kings including the Mughal empire.

The imperial spectacles of 1851 and 1911 in London achieved something quite different. Exhibitions in Paris (1855), Dublin (1865), London (1862) and Paris (1867) had ethnological photographs, curios, manufactured products, raw materials and illustrations of Indian architecture.

The epigraph to this section makes it clear that it was the power, reach and authority of the Empire that had to be brought home to the sight and imagination of the London residents. London was an imperial city, a ‘world city’, or, as the \textit{Souvenir of the Pageant of London} termed it, an ‘empire city’. It was the capital not only of England but of an Empire by the 1880s (Briggs 1982: 317). London’s architecture itself had to have a certain imperial air about them (Bremner 2005). \textit{The Builder} periodical published a plan for ‘Imperial London’ in January 1912. Statues of Captain Cook (sponsored by the British Empire League) were unveiled in 1914 and memorials to those killed in fighting in South Africa and China were erected around the same time. London city was slowly being transformed. The Queen Victoria Memorial itself, it was argued, might be linked to the Empire. As one commentator put it:

The Empire must have a capital, and all citizens whether they belonged to the United Kingdom, to India, or the colonies … ought to be proud of that capital, and try and ensure that it had monuments in it of that which is great and memorable in the history of the Empire. (As cited in Tori Smith 1999: 27)
Such spectacles were meant to bring an awareness, and awe, at the scope and nature of the Empire. A comment in *The Times* (8 July 1851) captures the sense of wonder and affiliation at the Empire’s extent (the report is describing an elephant at the 1851 Exhibition):

> It [the elephant] will, no doubt, be looked upon by thousands of spectators with emotions of pride and wonder as a genuine British production, captured by the prowess of an official of the Executive in the wilds of a neighbouring country. (as cited in Desmond 1982: 73)

These emotions would, in the stated aims of the 1911 Pageant, ensure that the British would feel a sense of affinity with their imperial outposts.

The 1911 Pageant was an aesthetic spectacle that forged a sense of connection, for all English visitors to see themselves as a part of the large ‘British’ imperial family and served the educational purpose of introducing the empire’s possessions.

The Pageant was a spectacle that

1. encoded a discourse of cultural identity amongst the English peoples
2. depicted London as essentially an *imperial city* (London was the location of the Pageant)
3. underscored the city’s role as administrative and financial capital of the Empire,
4. educated the people about the city’s role in the Empire, and created a sense of citizenship (Ryan 1999).

The Pageant of London was part of the Festival of Empire. It had a historical narrative, from the earliest known periods of British history. It was titled: ‘The Dawn of British History. A picture of primitive times. Some early inhabitants of London’. The event concluded with a ‘Masque Imperial’.

There were forty scenes at the Pageant, organized into four parts, spread over three days. It had a tour (called, with a singular lack of imagination, the ‘Red Tour’), where one could step onto a train and go through the overseas dominions. Local scenery and life were replicated on the route for the passengers to see and observe. In what was a virtual experience of the colony, this was unparalleled spectacle. It made use of the rhetoric of education, entertainment and sentiment so that the experience of being a part of the great empire could be forged and reinforced.

Detailed India references in the *Souvenir of the Pageant of London* (Lomas 1911) began with accounts of the ‘Return Home of the First Expedition of the East India Company 1603’. For realism it used quotes from the Court Minutes of the East India Company (EIC) and replicated the arrival of Thomas Roe, the ambassador, at the Mughal court in 1615.

The ‘Masque Imperial’ described the task of the empire thus:

```
Evolving fitfully the theme
On an all-comprehending law,
All her progress
All her success,
Must based be
On equity,
Even as the celestial hierarchy.
This to achieve is the pure task of Empire. (Lomas 1911: 148)
```
In a series of nature–metaphors and imagery, the Masque went on to suggest how the spirit of Nature and the genius of the world was with the British empire. It also called upon the imperialists to be just and fair in their empire:

When you conquer make your rule  
As your war was, for the best  
Of that nation’s interest;  
Let them learn to love your school,  
And to call your teachings blest (Lomas 1911: 153)

It listed the people who had made the empire: discoverer, explorer, scientist, warrior, politician, poet, priest, Reformer, missionary (Lomas 1911: 155). The Masque also listed the Empire’s geographical territories (Lomas 1911: 157–58).

The Pageant’s stated aim was to strengthen ‘closeness of the associations’ that held an empire together. It began by stating that this pageant was ‘a social gathering of the British Family’, and then calling it a ‘family gathering’. The 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley was described as a ‘Family Party of the British Empire’ (Ryan 1999: 119). The souvenir booklet declared: ‘this is the most educational spectacle ever seen in London’ (Ryan 1999: 121).

What is important is that the Pageant showcased the British Empire as the apotheosis, the climactic moment of the evolution of the English peoples. It suggested that the Empire was the natural progression of any civilization, and the British, by having acquired an Empire, had reached its zenith, and discovered its true identity.

Conclusion

The imperial spectacle was the most dramatic staging of the nature of colonial relations. In India, it made the subjects willing participants in the ritual, symbolic order and hierarchy of the Empire. It spectacularized racial and social hierarchies, the pomp of imperial Briton, the extent of British territory. In England, it enabled the English to see themselves as connected to an imperial destiny. As acts of political communication, there has been nothing before or since the great imperial spectacles.

Imperial improvisation, as this essay has demonstrated, becomes an act of cross-cultural as well as intercultural communications because it appropriates different cultural practices (the nazār of the Mughal durbar) into its structure—thus enabling it to make sense to the native/colonized subjects. A larger case might be made for decoding the entire imperial edifice as being made possible because Britain could convey its power, authority and sovereignty across cultures and languages. Imperial spectacles therefore functioned as a language of power that spoke to millions of diverse peoples and cultures in the subcontinent.

Notes

2. Such an improvisation that foregrounded the unchanging power and aristocratic authority of the British might well have been necessary, as Francis Hutchins suggests: ‘India seemed to offer the prospect of aristocratic security at a time when England itself was falling prey to democratic vulgarity’ (1967).
3. On the debates around the Titles Act of 1876 by which Victoria was declared Empress see LA Knight (1968).
4. There were 50,741 Indians in the camps, 9,741 Indians in the imperial camps (as clerks and others), 8,438 in the miscellaneous camps, and 1,169 Europeans, with a total of about 84,000 people (Cohn 1983: 196).

5. In 1861 a new royal order of Indian knighthood was instituted, the Star of India. Initially this was intended for important Indian princes and distinguished British officers, but was later expanded to include the lower orders as well. Bernard Cohn notes that this ‘investiture and holding of the chapters of the order added an important European component to the ritual idiom which the British were establishing in India: it was at once English and feudal, and emphasized the contractual aspect of the entitlement, for the accoutrements of the order were to be returned at the death of the holder (Cohn 1983: 181–82). This was followed by the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire (instituted in 1878), the Imperial Order of the Crown of India (1878). Such awards, writes David Cannadine, ‘partly unite[d] [Indians] with the British’ (Cannadine 2001: 89). Further, since many of these awards were given to both British statesmen and Indian princes (for their loyalty or efficiency in running their states), they served as a ‘sign of ordered hierarchy and honorific equality’ (Cannadine 2001: 90). On honours, titles, Durbars and the Empire see Frykenberg (1986), Haynes (1990) and Trevithick (1990).

6. For a study of how photography served imperial purposes see Landau and Kaspin (2002).

7. On occasion, however, this arrangement of the local rulers did not work. In the 1911 Durbar, for example, the Maharaja Gaekward of Baroda refused to pay due obeisance to the King Emperor and Queen Empress. The entire incident soon triggered massive debates, some calling for the Maharaja’s dismissal and others hailing it as a nationalist act of resistance. For a study see Nuckolls (1990).

8. Douglas Haynes in his study of similar Durbars in Surat has argued that because rituals were integral to the construction of political authority, even the nationalist movement appropriated these rites. Haynes writes: ‘Indian elites did not conceive of generating their own political authority entirely outside its contours. Members of the new Congress leadership were, however, able to substitute new nationalist content into political rites, thereby reformulating somewhat the values that these events communicated’ (Haynes 1990: 494).

9. At the 1911 Coronation Durbar George V made his surprise announcement (planned and executed in great secrecy, the Announcement was read in the English Parliament on 12 December 1911, the same day as it was being read in Delhi): the capital would be shifted to Delhi from Calcutta (for a summary of the causes and consequences of the Announcement see Frykenberg 1993).

References


*Journal of Creative Communications*, 5, 2 (2010): 75–87

**Pramod K. Nayar**, affiliated to the Department of English, University of Hyderabad.
E-mail: pramodknayar@gmail.com

*Journal of Creative Communications*, 5, 2 (2010): 75–87