

UNIT 30 – UPSC - Delhi Durbar & The Presidency of Bengal

India's History : Modern India : Delhi Durbar; Partition of Bengal modified to create the Presidency of Bengal : 1911

Delhi Durbar



Delhi Coronation Durbar was held on 12 December 1911 before an assembly of about 80,000 select people of British India and the princely states apparently to mark the accession of King George V to the throne of Great Britain on the death of Edward VII. But the real intention behind holding the Durbar in the presence of the King and Queen was to pacify the Bengal agitators who were becoming increasingly militant in realizing their manifold demands, such as, annulment of the partition of Bengal, having Governor-in-Council for Bengal, releasing political prisoners, reform of the local government and education system, and liberalizing recruitment and promotions in the army and the bureaucracy.

Being unable to contain the ever-growing agitation of the Bengali nationalists, who were joined in by the militants of other provinces, the India Council and the Governor General-in-Council and Viceroy had resolved secretly to meet many of the nationalist demands. But they were anticipating that concessions made in the face of resistance might encourage further agitation on the one hand and create new opposition fronts from the affected Muslims on the other. Faced with the dilemma, the Secretary of State persuaded the cabinet members to agree on the idea of taking advantage of the coronation of the new king and staging a hallowed and awe-inspiring imperial Durbar in India in the presence of His Majesty with all oriental splendor and exuberance and announcing the concessions as royal favors.

The Coronation at Westminster Abbey took place on June 22, 1911. On the advice of the cabinet, the King George V had resolved to create a new precedent by proceeding himself with the Queen to India at the close of the year, in order to preside over the projected Durbar which was, for political reasons again, to be held at Delhi, and not at Calcutta, the capital of India. The grand Durbar was held with all the trappings of the imperial Mughal Durbar. The King was to play the Great Mughal at the Durbar, which he did well by endowing every interest group with what it looked for. The

King announced for the generality some imperial boons and benefits, which included land grants, a month's extra pay for soldiers and subordinate civil servants, establishment of a new university at Dhaka and allotment of five million Taka for it, declaration of the eligibility of the Indians for the Victoria Cross, and so on. Bestowing of honours on the elite with the aristocratic titles of Sirs, Rajas, Maharajas, Nawabs, Roy bahadurs and Khan bahadurs followed the distribution of benevolence.



Finally came the royal announcement of changes of far greater magnitude. These were the transference of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the annulment of the 1905-Partition of Bengal, the creation of a Governor-in-Council for united Bengal, separating Bihar, Orissa and Chhota nagpur from Bengal's jurisdiction and integrating them into a new Lieutenant Governor's province, and the reduction of Assam once more to a Chief-Commissionership. The King then pronounced that henceforth the Viceroy would be progressively concerned with imperial interests only and the Governor-in-Council and elected bodies should progressively run the provincial concerns autonomously.

These changes were deeply constitutional and political and undoubtedly very striking and dramatic. The agitators, in fact, did not expect that the King would at all raise the constitutional and political issues, which were the preserves of parliament. Subsequent to the Durbar, George V made a visit to Calcutta where he got hero's receptions. However, the contemporary public opinion in Britain had received the royal edicts with considerable suspicion and cynicism. It was argued in the press that if the King made all these constitutional and political concessions on his own, he had encroached upon the rights of the parliament very grotesquely and dangerously, and if the politicians used His Majesty's dignity to implement their own secret plans without taking the parliament into confidence, it was again unconstitutional.

Delhi Durbar had achieved its purpose almost entirely. The Durbar declarations, which were soon incorporated into statutes, made the militant nationalists return back to constitutional politics, and the Muslim leaders, though disturbed and disgruntled, remained loyal to the Raj by and large. The Bengal nationalists had no regret for the transfer of the capital because the loss was more than compensated by the gain of the status of the Governor's province, the absence of which had been affecting so long its political, economic and administrative developments. Bombay and Madras had been enjoying the constitutional status of the Governor-in-Council from the beginning of the British rule.