



## Coronations and Colonial Control

Erica Kim Ollikainen-Read

30 June 2023

DOI: 10.17176/20230630-185956-0

---

### ABSTRACT

Whilst today's royal family try to distance themselves from Britain's dark history of colonialism, a comparison of the coronation of King Charles III and Queen Victoria's Indian 'Coronation Durbar' in 1877 allows us to see that the act of coronation is far from just 'pomp and circumstance.' In fact, coronations have actively been used as a means of colonial control. What might we learn from Britain's colonial past in India about the role of coronations in the future?

---

- 1 On the 6 May 2023, around [18 million people](#) tuned in from across the world to watch the coronation of King Charles III. Whatever one's opinions on the British monarchy, the commonwealth, and its dark past, no one can deny it was a lavish event, featuring archaic tradition and mysterious symbolism. The efforts of King Charles to promote himself as the leader of a 'modern monarchy' and to honour yet distinguish himself from the reign of his mother were clear in the run-up to the coronation.
- 2 Almost 166 years ago to the day of the coronation—on 10 May 1857—the most famous uprising against British colonial rule in India began. The Indian Rebellion, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny or the first Indian War of Independence, culminated in conviction for treason and exile of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II, the dissolution of the East India Company, and the ceding of all its territories in India to the British Crown. The end of the Rebellion required a special kind of 'rebranding' for Britain's colonial project in India. With two of the main symbols of legal authority (the Company, and the Mughal Emperor) on the Indian subcontinent rather hurriedly and unceremoniously swept away, Queen Victoria—the Crown personified—quickly stepped into a new and important role as a representative of English legal authority in India. Without delay, Victoria was presented as a bringer of peace, issuing a

Proclamation on the 1 November 1858 addressed to 'the Princes, Chiefs, and people of India' in which she indicated a change in governance and attitude towards the people. Most significantly, after the Royal Titles Act 1876, a special coronation event known as the 'Imperial Assemblage' or 'Coronation Durbar' was organized in Delhi on 1 January 1877 to crown Queen Victoria (in absentia—she never actually visited India) as the *Kaiser-i-Hind* or 'Empress of India'.

3

Why was it so important that Queen Victoria should legally adopt the title of 'Empress of India'? After all, no other British colony was granted such a special honour. In becoming India's Empress, Victoria could be presented as a successor to the Mughals, thereby justifying Britain's continued presence in India. Victoria's Viceroy in India, Lord Lytton, wrote in a letter to the Queen that the purpose of the Coronation Durbar was to place the Queen's authority 'on the ancient throne of the Mughals with which the imagination and tradition of our Indian subjects associated the splendour of Imperial power'.<sup>1</sup> This was achieved by placing Queen Victoria and her Viceroy Lord Lytton—as her agent—at the centre of a complex web of both British and Mughal (or at least, the British colonial interpretation of Mughal) ritualistic display. In doing so, the British were also able to shore up their relationship with India's semi-independent Princely States. Although these were nominally independent territories, after 1858, they became suzerain to the British Crown. It was especially important for Britain to reinforce these relationships to avoid any further military uprisings. In addition, then Prime minister Disraeli claimed in the House of Commons that the Bill to change Victoria's title to include 'Empress of India' was brought forward 'with a conviction that it will be a source of satisfaction to the many millions of people who in India obey the rule of Her Majesty'.<sup>2</sup>

4

Victoria's Coronation Durbar was a huge event which ran from the 23 December 1876 to the 5 January 1877. Activities centred around the declaration of Victoria's assumption of the title of Empress of India, which took place on the 1 January, known as 'Proclamation Day'. The event was designed to accommodate some 84,000 specially invited attendees. Of these, only 1169 were European.<sup>3</sup> This essay considers some comparisons that legal historians can draw between the coronation of King Charles III in 2023 and the Coronation Durbar held for Queen Victoria in Delhi in 1877, concerning oaths and speeches, the centrality of the Christian religion, and the importance of acts of symbolism. Whilst today's royal family try to distance themselves from Britain's dark history of colonialism, looking at the two events side by side allows us to see that a coronation is far from just 'pomp and circumstance' and has in fact actively been used as a means of colonial control.

## The Coronation Oath

5

It is a legal requirement that the British monarch take a coronation oath, which sets out the Monarch's position within the constitutional framework of the UK. According to the [Coronation Oath Act of 1688](#), used since the coronations of King William III and Queen Mary II, the monarch is bound by the oath to (1) rule according to laws agreed 'in Parliament', therefore limiting the power of the monarch following the

'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, (2) cause law, justice, and mercy to be executed in their judgments; and (3) maintain 'the Protestant Reformed Religion Established by Law' (ie the Church of England).

6 The [exact wording](#) of the oath is not legally defined and has been subject to change. At his coronation, King Charles III pledged to: (1) 'govern the Peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, [and his] other Realms and the Territories ... according to their respective laws and customs', (2) 'cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all [his] judgements', and (3) 'maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England'. King Charles also swore the Accession Declaration Oath stating that he was a 'faithful Protestant'.

7 Despite these affirmations to the Protestant faith, an effort was made in the organization of the coronation to include and appeal to people of all faith, and no faith. This is particularly notable given the changes in religious demographics in the UK since the time of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953. In 2021, [census data](#) showed that for the first time a minority of the UK population identify as being Christian. To the preamble of the coronation oath, a declaration that the Church of England would 'seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths may live freely' was [added](#) by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In addition, the coronation service included the participation of representatives from the Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim communities in the UK for the first time.

## Queen Victoria's Speeches

8 Queen Victoria was not obliged to take an oath in order to take on the title of 'Empress of India'. However, an indirect comparison can be made between Charles' oath and Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November 1858 and the speech given by her Viceroy Lord Lytton at her Coronation Durbar on 1 January 1877. By taking the three pledges contained in King Charles' coronation oath in turn, we can see some similarities in both the tone and nature of the messages that both monarchs sought to convey to 'their people' despite the difference in time and space. This in turn reveals insights into the way in which the constitutional elements of a coronation were used as part of the process of transfer of British legal ideals to the Empire.

### **(I) Governing his 'realms and territories' ... 'according to their respective laws and customs'**

9 A comparison can be drawn between the modern commonwealth—today consisting of fifty-six countries which maintain the British monarch as their head of state—and Britain's relationship with the semi-independent Princely States of the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similar to how today's British monarchy is facing calls to react to changing perceptions of the commonwealth and the monarch's role within it, following the Rebellion of 1858, the British acted quickly to present Crown rule (in distinction to Company rule) in a favourable light to the rulers of India's Princely States. This can be seen in Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November 1858:

We know, and respect, the feelings of attachment with which the natives of India regard the lands inherited by them from their ancestors, and we desire to protect them in all rights connected therewith ... and we will that generally, in framing and administering the law, due regard be paid to the ancient rights, usages, and customs of India.

## (II) Causing 'law and justice' to be executed in all his judgements

10 Victoria sent a letter in advance to her Coronation Durbar which was read aloud to the crowds by Viceroy Lytton. Of particular interest is the line:

We trust that the present occasion may tend to unite in bonds of close affection ourselves and our subjects; that from the highest to the humblest, all may feel that under our rule the great principles of liberty, equity, and justice are secured to them.<sup>4</sup>

11 This sentiment was echoed by Viceroy Lytton in a new year's eve banquet held the night before, where he stated, 'I conceive that the real strength of our Indian empire, and the permanent guarantee for the durability of that strength, consist in the impartial and inflexible justice of its rule'.<sup>5</sup> This highlights the extent to which idealized representations of justice, rather than military or financial might alone were seen to be the basis of British rule in India going forward.

## (III) Maintain 'the Protestant Reformed Religion Established by Law'

12 In her Proclamation of 1 November 1858, Victoria stated:

Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects. We declare it to be our royal will and pleasure that none be in any wise favoured, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances ...<sup>6</sup>

13 These words indicate a similarity to the attitude taken by King Charles III today: A belief in Christianity as the 'one true faith' but also a recognition of the fact that over-proselytizing and interference in Indian religious affairs could be a very real threat to Britain's continued presence in India.

## The Symbolism of Crowning and Pledging Allegiance

14 After being crowned, King Charles sat on a wooden throne known as St Edwards Chair, which dates back to 1300. From this throne, monarchs have traditionally received homage from a long line of royal family members and peers during the coronation service. To save time, only Prince William offered homage to his father in this manner. Instead, somewhat controversially, the [Archbishop invited attendees](#) in Westminster Abbey, and those watching from elsewhere, to collectively pledge allegiance by saying the words: 'I swear that I will pay true allegiance to Your Majesty, and to your heirs and successors according to law. So help me God'.

- 15 Whilst there was no actual coronation at Victoria's durbar, the demonstration of loyalty and a pledge of allegiance from India's ruling princes and chiefs was a central feature. However, instead of asking the princes to swear an oath, the British co-opted a traditional Mughal practice of exchanging goods known as *nazeer* and *khelats* which symbolized the proclamation and acceptance of authority via the concept of incorporation: By accepting a gift, the subordinate was incorporated into the personage of the Emperor. Ninety of India's most important princes and chiefs were invited to have a personal audience with the Viceroy. Sat on his own special throne, with a large painting of Queen Victoria observing the proceedings from behind him, each Indian ruler was presented with his own personalized heraldic banner made of silk, designed for the occasion especially by the British College of Arms in Calcutta. The banner was presented with the words 'Her Majesty trusts that it may never be unfurled without reminding you, not only of the close union between the Throne of England and your loyal princely house'.<sup>7</sup>
- 16 In this way, the relationship which had existed between the Indian Princes and the Mughal Emperor was reformulated in the eyes of the British to one akin to a feudal relationship between a vassal and his overlord. Thus, we see that a central element of the coronation of the British monarch—the pledging of allegiance—was transferred to India and mixed with elements of Mughal tradition in order to assert British authority.

## Conclusion

- 17 Coronations can be understood as a means of providing a sense of stability and continuity in uncertain times. In 1858, Britain faced an existential challenge in India. An important part of Britain's response was to remove old sources of authority and overtly replace them with Queen Victoria—the authority of the Crown personified. Elements of the act of coronation were transplanted to India as a means of creating a semblance of continuity by representing her as a natural successor to the Mughal Emperor. However, this new line of succession only lasted 70 years before Indian independence in 1947. George V was the first and last British monarch to attend his Durbar in person. Today, King Charles III has the difficult task of succeeding the United Kingdom's longest reigning monarch, whilst surely knowing that it is not altogether impossible that he could be its last, given changing attitudes and recent scandals. His coronation reflected a crisis of a similar yet different kind: A particularly British identity crisis which continues to simmer, brought on in part as a result of the disintegration of its Empire. As such, his coronation demonstrated a commitment to today's Britain, and the Britain of the future, whilst simultaneously harkening back to Britain's colonial past. It remains to be seen to what extent the act of coronation can continue to be modernized, or indeed if it will survive at all.

## Notes

- 1 Bernard Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India' in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (OUP 2010) 656.
- 2 Mr Disraeli, HC Deb 17 February 1876, vol 227 cc 407-28, c 426.
- 3 James Wheeler, *The History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi* (Longmans 1877) 68.
- 4 Wheeler (n 3) 87.
- 5 Wheeler (n 3) 112–13.
- 6 Proclamation by the Queen to the Princes, Chiefs and the People of India (1 November 185) 384.
- 7 Wheeler (n 3) 58–9.

---

**SUGGESTED CITATION:** Erica Kim Ollikainen-Read, 'Coronations and Colonial Control', *Max Planck Law Perspectives* (30 June 2023), <https://law.mpg.de/perspectives/coronations-and-colonial-control/>, DOI: 10.17176/20230630-185956-0

---

