

THE DURBAR AS SPECTACLE



## THE GREAT DURBAR CROWDS: THE PARTICIPANT AUDIENCE

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The grand displays of massed soldiery, British pomp and princely India that made up the face of the three great Delhi Durbars are exemplars of what the British could do by way of magnificence of display. The Raj, seemingly, could outdo its predecessors when it put its mind to it, and manufacture an imperial grandeur so elaborate as to arouse apparently enormous public enthusiasm throughout India. Yet in amongst all the pomp and power in durbar photographs—marching soldiers, princes on elephants, European sahibs and memsahibs, icing-cake pavilions—there is one feature usually caught only in passing. Rarely is the crowd, the audience, the public—supposedly the entity the durbar was meant to impress—the subject at the core of the photographic effort.

Crowds are present of course: there were too many people attending for some not to be in the frame. However, the object of their gaze is generally the focus of the photographic image. The crowd usually appears densely massed, seemingly with a single visual purpose—to frame and direct attention to the “main” action of the photograph: procession, marching troops, viceroy, monarch, or whatever else was offered as the key part of the show. This of course raises the question as to who the audience was, who constituted the crowds and why they were there. The photographic record provides some answers.

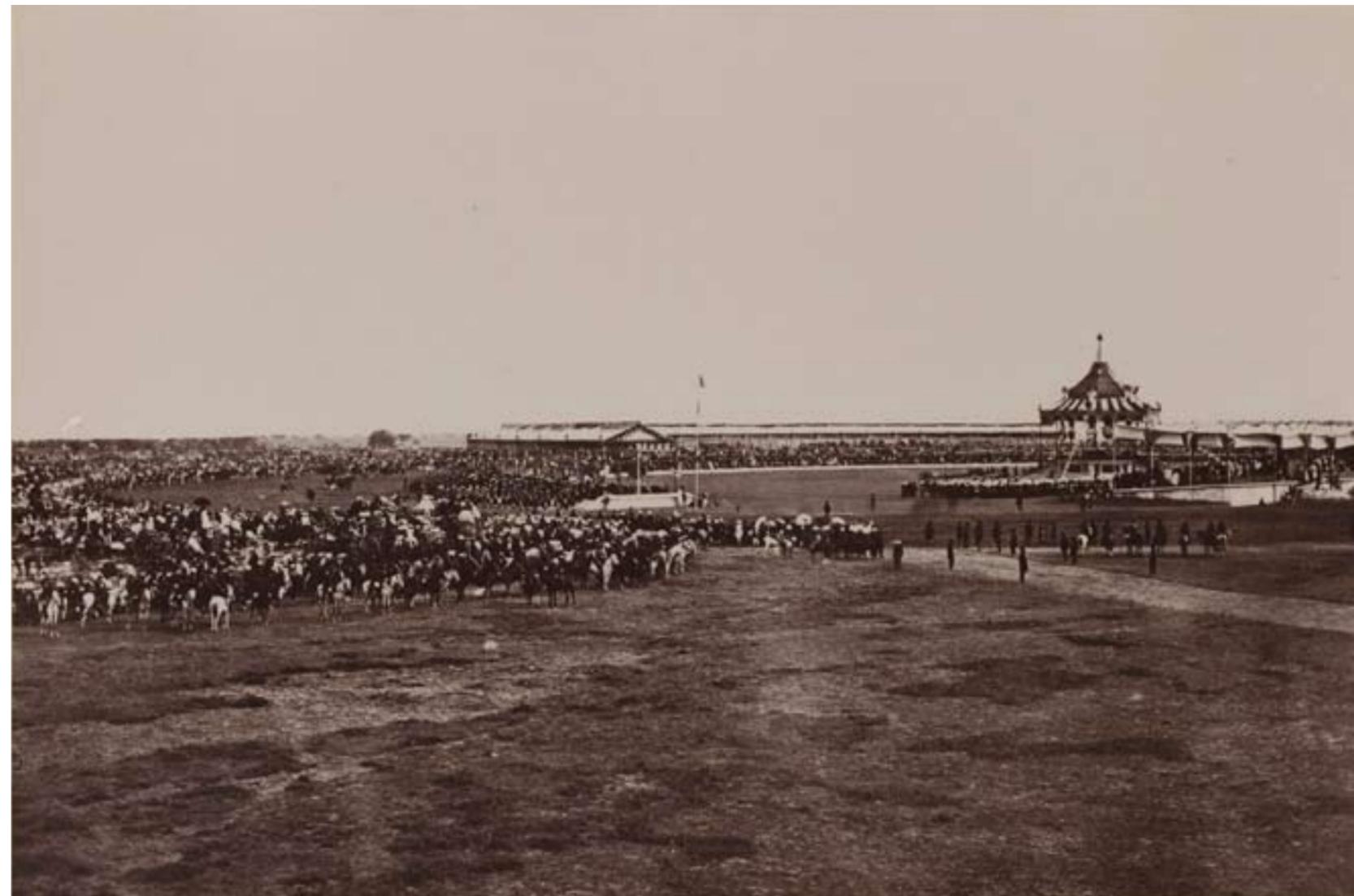
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114 **UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER**  
The Delhi Herald, 1911–12  
Silver Gelatin Print, 196 x 288 mm

Although the audience achieves increasing visibility over the three durbars, in the first they feature in only a few photos. Several 1877 photographs show them in great semi-circles, separate from but surrounding the amphitheatre defined by the two extended pavilions seating official guests and the central “gazebo” where the viceroy, Lord Lytton, and his party presided. One photo establishes the geography of the proceedings on 1 January with a dense mass of people forming a huge outer sweep and so framing the circle of pavilions and the soldiers in formation within it. The crowd is virtually a solid block with hardly any detail discernible, though it is evident that some people are on horseback. People have been reduced to being part of the overall event, helping to make up the *mise-en-scène* of the Imperial Assemblage (fig. 115).

Likewise reduced to pinpoint invisibility were the notables in the pavilions; as invited audience, they are part of the undifferentiated backdrop to the activity around the viceroy. The presence of all those people in the standing crowd and in the seated audience helped provide a sense of the massive event’s spatial parameters. Thus, by framing the expanse, the photograph manages to make interesting and invest with significance an unremarkable plain that, according to Lady Lytton, was “so vast it is very difficult for anything to make a show on it”.<sup>1</sup>

The greater detail in another photograph (fig. 116) gives some insight into the composition of this mass of people. They stand, backs to the camera, as a foreground frame for what they are looking at, the massed troops who are the dominant subject. The detail indicates that those in the



115 **BOURNE & SHEPHERD**  
The Imperial Assemblage, from ‘The History of the  
Imperial Assemblage at Delhi’, 1877  
Woodburytype, 185 x 121 mm



116 **UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER**  
Proclamation Day (1st January 1877) at Secunderabad  
(Part 2 of Two Part Panorama), 1877–78  
Albumen Print, 225 x 295 mm



foreground were of some importance, even if not as elevated as the notables seated in the pavilions. There are Europeans wearing *topees*, or shading themselves with umbrellas. Also present are well-dressed Indians, two holding what appear to be princely regalia—large ornate fans or standards.

A third photograph (fig. 117) has been occasionally reproduced to epitomise the durbar.<sup>2</sup> Its sharp detail enables a clearer reading of the four- or five-deep crowd in the foreground. On the right a cluster of European soldiers mixes with upper-class Indians and European civilians, and there are two riders on horseback, presumably to get a better view. All seem intent on what was unfolding, unconcerned over literal mingling between rulers and ruled. Here at least the spatial separation that Ballhatchet argues existed between Europeans and Indians during the time of the Raj, seems not

117 **BOURNE & SHEPHERD (ATTRIB.)**  
Untitled (Imperial Assemblage, Coronation Pavilion and Amphitheatre), 1877  
Albumen Print, 180 x 323 mm

to apply.<sup>3</sup> Nor did it apply to seating arrangements in the pavilions, if the example of the only Parsi woman to attend the durbar is typical.<sup>4</sup> Mrs Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawalla who went from Bombay to Delhi as a curious tourist managed at the last moment to wrangle seats in the pavilion for herself and her brother; she in the front row between the governor-general of Goa and Lady Staveley, the wife of the commander-in-chief of Bombay; the brother is directly behind her.

A rare image (fig. 118) of the lower ranks shows people standing on the roofs of carriages or on victorias and other