




SURVEY AND SPECULATION

Enfolding empire into 1930s London: the India Round Table Conference

Stephen Legg 

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
Email: stephen.legg@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

This survey reflects on the intersections of global and urban history through brief reflections on the Round Table Conference which took place over three sessions in London between 1930 and 1932. Uniting Indian representatives and the British government in London to solve political stalemate in South Asia, the conference provides a dramatic event through which to explore the enfolding of the British empire into the imperial capital. But the conference was also indebted to international and global connections and comparisons which intersected in the intimate spaces of diplomatic networking in the capital.

In this brief survey, I would like to show how the India Round Table Conference (RTC), which took place over three sessions in London between 1930 and 1932, can be considered as both a global and an imperial urban historical event. While imperialism can be considered a hegemonic, historical phase in the much longer history of globalization, it was always already limited and challenged by non- or extra-imperial forms of mobility, influence and urbanization.¹ The RTC was global in terms of the precedents it drew on for its recommendations, the scope of its audience and its ramifications for governors and anti-colonial campaigners beyond the British empire. It was imperial in that it reconfigured the constitutional relationship between Britain and its largest colonial possession, heralding a supposedly third British empire modelled on, not rivalled by, the international.² Bringing dozens of selected representatives of imperial India to London, the RTC not only politically but socially and culturally made imperial India tangible, visible and audible in the imperial metropole in an unprecedented way. As such, this commentary encourages practitioners in the field of imperial urban studies to consider international conferences as

¹P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (Harlow, 2002); K. Grant, P. Levine and F. Trentmann (eds.), *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950* (Basingstoke, 2007); F. Halliday, 'Three concepts of internationalism', *International Affairs*, 64 (1988), 187–98.

²Mrunalini Sinha, 'Whatever happened to the Third British Empire? Empire, nation redux', in A. Thompson (ed.), *Writing Imperial Histories* (Manchester, 2013), 168–87; A. Zimmern, *The Third British Empire: Being a Course of Lectures Delivered at Columbia University, New York* (London, 1927).

events which enfolded empire into the urban, whilst also connecting out beyond empire to global sites and linkages.³

This prompts the question, what do we study when we study global urban history? Some, though few, of us conduct global comparative studies of networked and networking cities. Others, more commonly, explore the *longue durée* emergence of cities from local to regional to national to global significance. Shorter *durée* studies might provide extra, granular detail for the emergence or functioning of a city over time that had either global significance or which simply helps us understand the functioning and production of the global in the urban. Collapsing the duration yet further brings us to studies of events that help us understand global urban history. Such events can be political (such as revolutions, coups or elections), economic (strikes, revolutions in production or market crashes) or cultural (atmospheres, exhibitions or artistic milieux). Some can be all of these, and more.

Making India in London: the Round Table Conference

The RTC event was triggered by the British government. Under the advice of the viceroy of India, it invited delegates to London to break a series of political stalemates that were leading to political unrest in the subcontinent.⁴ It brought together delegates from directly administered British India and the indirectly administered Indian States, governed by hereditary rulers. They were joined by liberals, who wanted to reform the British system, and Gandhi's Indian National Congress, which demanded complete independence. Hindu and Muslim representatives defended their communities' demands, while other minority leaders staked their claims. The conference sessions, lasting two, then three, then one month, were carried out in private, but the delegates stayed in hotels throughout the city and their presence caused a sensation. While Indians of all classes had been settled in London for over a century, the conference brought a newer sense of the modern Indian empire into the streets, cafes, tearooms and theatres of the imperial capital.⁵

For the British government to have called social and political leaders from India to London for direct consultation was unprecedented. But viewed through the lens of multi-imperial or international history, the conference can be fitted into a longer line

³On imperial cities, see F. Driver and D. Gilbert, *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester, 1999). On London specifically, see J. Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven and London, 1999); M. Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015). For varied reflections on the interactions between international conferences and their urban settings, see S. Legg, M. Heffernan, J. Hodder and B. Thorpe (eds.), *Placing Internationalism: International Conferences and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2021); S. Marks, 'Behind the scenes at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919', *Journal of British Studies*, 9 (1970), 154–80; N. Shimazu, 'Diplomacy as theatre: staging the Bandung Conference of 1955', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48 (2014), 225–52; B.E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Harvard, 2014); R. Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Jackson, 1956).

⁴S. Legg, *Round Table Conference Geographies: Constituting Colonial India in Interwar London* (Cambridge, 2023).

⁵R. Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London, 2002).

of precedence. This genealogy is one of those moments in the imperial core when representatives of a colonial periphery came to bid for greater autonomy, or even independence. The RTC features neither in accounts of multi-colonial representation at imperial conferences, nor in accounts of multi-imperial representation at international conferences.⁶ It is depicted, rather, as a meeting of two polities.⁷ The geographies that the conference enfolded into London were much richer, however, than this depiction allows. This can be demonstrated by the role of the international, of America, and of the vast difference of the Indian empire in the urban spaces of the conference.

First, the conference itself was an inherently international creation, drawing upon traditions, places and institutions far beyond the India–Britain axis. The RTC was explicitly modelled on the ‘conference method’ that was being pioneered and systematized by the League of Nations from Geneva.⁸ The League was appealed to as a model, as a precedent and even as a potential arbiter. Many of the delegates had also represented their country, whether Britain or India, at one of the many international institutions based at Geneva. And internationalisms, both religious and worker, were appealed to in conference debates.

Second, the conference brought the influence of other countries into the imperial capital in unanticipated ways. The secretary of state for India, William Wedgwood Benn, was especially sensitive to how the conference was viewed in the USA. The dedicated press officers at the conference were encouraged to push out positive propaganda that would counter anti-British sentiments in America. Benn was convinced that the Movietone newsreel footage of the conclusion of the first sessions, showing British and Indian delegates congratulating and chatting amiably in the conference venue of St James’s Palace, could transform the congress perspective, successfully communicated to global audiences by Gandhi, of a bloodthirsty colonial authoritarian state.⁹ Less directly, the conference’s opening surprise announcement triggered a panicked engagement with international constitutions. Unanticipated by most in London, the British and Indian states delegates declared that they would use the conference to devise a federation for all of India. At best a distant prospect until then, delegates and staff would spend the following months reading up on the federal constitutions of Canada, Germany, the USA and Switzerland in the hope of devising a constitution that could bring together the vast range of different administrations which governed India’s 330 million subjects.¹⁰

Finally, the vast complexity of the subcontinent raises questions now, as it did then, about whether India was, itself, multi-national. The colonial Government of

⁶Legg *et al.* (eds.), *Placing Internationalism*; M. Ollivier, *Imperial Conferences* (Ottawa, 1954); M. Grandjean and M.H. Van Leeuwen, ‘Mapping internationalism: congresses and organisations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’, in D. Laqua, W. Van Acker and C. Vergruggen (eds.), *International Organizations and Global Civil Society: Histories of the Union of International Associations* (London, 2019), 225–42.

⁷R.J. Moore, *The Crisis of Indian Unity, 1917–1940* (Oxford, 1974).

⁸Legg, *Round Table Conference Geographies*; S. Legg, ‘Imperial internationalism: the Round Table Conference and the making of India in London, 1930–32’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 11 (2020), 32–53.

⁹See www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/conferencing-the-international/representations/film.aspx, accessed on 14 Aug. 2023.

¹⁰Regarding Germany, see S. Pillai, ‘German lessons: comparative constitutionalism, states’ rights, and federalist imaginaries in interwar India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2023), 1–27.

India had been disturbed in the 1920s by suggestions that the Indian States might be considered quasi-sovereign, that relations between the Indian and British states might be considered to be international and thus that they might be subject to League of Nations investigation.¹¹ Forging an all-India federation would obviate this possibility in the future, but the attempt to represent all of India in London makes it clear that the conference might better be considered a meeting of two empires, the British and Indian, rather than two nations or states. [Figure 1](#) demonstrates the attempts made at the first two sessions to select representatives across the Indian empire, which at this point still included Burma, as well as what would later become Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Micro-geographies of India

When in London, the delegates were given an accommodation allowance which they could spend on hotels, but less-well-off delegates found the capital ruinously expensive. While some of the princes (hereditary Indian rulers) could host dinners for hundreds of people, including the toast of the London scene, other delegates took humble lodgings and entertained in affordable Lyons tearooms, if at all.¹² There were also fears that Indian delegates might be exposed to the racism which people of colour regularly faced in the imperial capital, causing not just embarrassment for the hosts but also a potentially ruinous political scandal. As such, a building was hired at Chesterfield Gardens in Mayfair where delegates could stay and eat Indian food, cooked by chefs from Regent Street's Veeraswamy's restaurant. A directory of conference delegates issued on 19 December 1930 listed Chesterfield Gardens as the home address of:

U Aung Thin from Burma; Sir Shah Nawaz Khan Ghulam Murtoza Khan Bhutto from Sind in northwest India; Captain Raja Sher Muhammad Khan of Domeli near the northern border of India; Mr Fazl-ul-Huq from Calcutta; the Council member Sir Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah and Bhaskarrao Vithojirao Jadhav of Bombay; the Viceroy's Executive Council member Sir Bhupendra Nath Mitra of Poona; Dr BS Moonje of Nagpur; Mr KT Paul of Salem in South India; Sir Abdul Qaiyum Khan of Peshawar; Diwan Bahadur M. Rama Chandra Rao of Ellore in southeast India; Dr Shafa' at Ahmad Khan of Allahabad; and M. R. Rao Bahadur Srinivasan Avargal of Poonamalle Cantonment in Madras.¹³

This rich diversity of Indian representatives spent their days cooped up in the committee rooms of St James's Palace or in their private dwellings. But out of hours, the delegates explored the urban landscape of the imperial capital in organized tours, group expeditions or in solo wanderings. Many of the wealthier delegates knew London well, having worked, been hosted or educated there. For many others, however, this was their first trip not only to London but to a major Western city. To some, this was a revelatory and life-changing exposure.

¹¹S. Legg, 'An international anomaly? Sovereignty, the League of Nations, and India's princely geographies', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 43 (2014), 96–110.

¹²On Lyons, see <https://spacesofinternationalism.omeka.net/items/show/39>, last accessed 2 Feb. 2024.

¹³Legg, *Round Table Conference Geographies*, 209.



Figure 1. Home cities of India-based delegates at the Round Table Conference Second Session.

Source: This map was designed by Benjamin Thorpe, using as its base map J.G. Bartholomew's 'General political map of the Indian empire. Plate 15' in *Constable's Hand Atlas of India* (Archibald Constable & Co., London, 1893), 15. Reproduced from the David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

The Hindu representative Dr B.S. Moonje was especially struck by the capital.¹⁴ But his private diaries also remind us of the rich diversity of impressions that the capital made on its visitors. The modernity of urban infrastructure struck Moonje, the underground trains and moving escalators especially. In contrast to the racism it was feared that delegates might face, Moonje was deeply impressed by the impartiality of the police and the helpfulness of businesses in the city. He was also, however, shocked by many of the contrasts between colonial Delhi, from which he often worked, and imperial London. Moonje encountered government officials who in Delhi paraded around as grand figures, but in London appeared as mere bureaucrats. He was shocked to encounter Indian youths in London, often the children of influence businessmen or officials, mimicking the trends of Western youth (new fashions, and smoking in front of their parents). Especially galling was the behaviour of Indian girls, who could be seen with short hair, dancing with men in bars. For Moonje, this represented both the worst of Western cities and of Indian

¹⁴S. Legg, 'Hindu nationalism in the international: BS Moonje's travel writing at the Round Table Conference', in E. Leake and B. Guyot-Réchar (eds.), *South Asia Unbound: New International Histories of the Subcontinent* (Leiden, 2023), 227–45.

internationalism, which had lost its groundings in the Hindu traditions that Moonje returned to India more committed than ever to defend.

Whether in the cosy lounge of Chesterfield Gardens, the smoke filled chambers of the conference venue or the social and dining spaces of the imperial capital, the global and the urban were made manifest and seeped into each other. But the enfolding of India and Britain into the intimate spaces of palaces, offices and hotels also brought to the forefront the vast difference (geographical, political and emotional) of these two huge empires. Hopefully, this brief example has provoked insights into the enfolding of the urban and the imperial in the nearly post-colonial period when the global, the international and the anti-colonial would intersect, often in the most unanticipated of spaces.