

VICTORIA: EMPRESS OF INDIA

By Dr.Y.Samuel P.W

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the role of Queen Victoria and her connection with India. Victoria was Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 20 June 1837 until her death. From 1 May 1876, she adopted the additional title of Empress of India. Queen Victoria was known as a headstrong head of state. She restored the reputation of a monarchy tarnished by the extravagance of her royal uncles. She also shaped a new role for the Royal Family, reconnecting it with the public through civic duties. At just 4ft 11in tall, Victoria was a towering presence as a symbol of her Empire. She and her husband Albert and their nine children came to symbolise a new, confident age. After the British East India Company deposed the Mughal Emperor, and after the British government dissolved the East India Company in 1874, Queen Victoria was given the title "Empress of India" (or *Kaisar-i-Hind*, a term coined by the orientalist G.W. Leitner in a deliberate attempt to dissociate British imperial rule from that of preceding dynasties) by the Royal Titles Act 1876, from 1 May 1876. Unlike earlier sovereigns and even later ones, Queen Victoria shared a special bond with India. Even before her official coronation as Empress of India, in her mind, she already considered herself as Queen of India. We observe that she showed a great deal of consideration and prudence in her relations with the Indian Princes and was statesmanlike in her approach to India.

Keywords

Queen Victoria, connection, India, Great Britain, Empress of India, headstrong, restored, reputation, new role, Royal Family, reconnecting, civic duties, towering presence, special bond, India, prudence, statesmanlike.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the role of Queen Victoria and her connection with India. Victoria was Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 20 June 1837 until her death. From 1 May 1876, she adopted the additional title of Empress of India. Queen Victoria whose original name was Alexandrina Victoria was born to the Duchess of Kent. Her father was the fourth son of George III and she was fifth in line to the throne. The princess, known as Victoria, was raised at Kensington Palace. She was educated by her governess Baroness Lehzen, who taught her languages, arithmetic, drawing and music. ⁱ

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After the death of two uncles, the teenage Victoria became heir to her final surviving uncle King William IV. But Victoria's youth was dominated by strict rules known as the 'Kensington System'. These rules included sharing a room with her mother and having no time alone. The system was designed by John Conroy, who hoped to manipulate her to gain further power and influence. Sir John Ponsonby Conroy, 1st Baronet, KCH (21 October 1786 – 2 March 1854) was a British army officer who served as comptroller to the Duchess of Kent and her young daughter, Princess Victoria, the future Queen of the United Kingdom.

When Victoria was 13 she was taken on a tour of the Midlands so that Conroy and her mother could show her off to the public. The princess found it exhausting and became increasingly stubborn. ⁱⁱⁱ Victoria succeeded her uncle William IV, just weeks after her 18th birthday. Her first request was an hour alone, something denied to her until then. Victoria moved to Buckingham Palace making it her official royal residence in London. She began exerting her will by exiling her mother to live in distant rooms. She also banned John Conroy the courtier who made her childhood miserable – from her state apartments. The young Queen was charmed by her first

prime minister, Lord Melbourne, who was both fatherly and admiring. She became the richest woman in the world after Parliament granted her an annuity of £385,000.

Queen Victoria: Empress of India

After the British East India Company deposed the Mughal Emperor, and after the British government dissolved the East India Company in 1874, Queen Victoria was given the title "Empress of India" (or *Kaisar-i-Hind*, a term coined by the orientalist G.W. Leitner in a deliberate attempt to dissociate British imperial rule from that of preceding dynasties) by the Royal Titles Act 1876, from 1 May 1876. The new title was proclaimed at the Delhi Durbar of 1877. The title came into use nineteen years after British India and the British protected states ('princely states') on the Indian subcontinent came under the control of the British Crown, following the dissolution of the British East India Company.^{iv}

With the passage of the Royal Titles Bill in the summer of 1876, Queen Victoria became Empress of India. Contemporaries saw the measure as a theatrical coup engineered by her prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli had neglected to consult properly the opposition before the announcement of the Bill in the Queen's speech and his critics therefore lambasted his imperial pretensions, which were deemed un-English and despotic. As David Feldman and Anthony Wohl have shown, antisemitic caricature of Disraeli reached a frenzied climax in 1876. The image of Disraeli as an Eastern potentate, corrupting the English monarchy by turning the Queen into an Empress was a popular theme within this stereotype, exemplified in *Punch's* "New Crowns for Old" cartoon of 15 April 1876, and also in Edward Jenkins's 1876 pamphlet *The Blot on the Queen's Head*, which sold 90,000 copies within the year. By contrast, Disraeli's supporters welcomed the Royal Titles Bill as a brilliant diplomatic move, which underlined Britain's global power in a world increasingly dominated by continental empires such as Russia, bearing down on the northwest frontier of India, and Germany, recently unified under the Prussian imperial throne.^v

Even before she was declared the Empress of India, Queen Victoria thought she was Empress of India already. Throughout the 1860s and early 1870s she habitually referred to herself as “Empress,” and to her Indian dependencies as her “empire.” For example, in June 1872, when told that envoys from Burma were refusing to prostrate themselves before her on their being received at court, she declared, “As Empress of India, I must insist on this”.^{vi}

A possible reason for Queen Victoria taking the title was that her daughter Crown Princess Victoria of Germany was to become Empress of Germany and as such could have outranked a queen. However, many in Britain regarded the assumption of the title as a fairly obvious development from the 1858 Government of India Act when the Crown replaced the East India Company, as the title 'Queen' was no longer considered adequate for the head of what had become known as the Indian Empire. The new styling would underline the fact that the native states were no longer a mere agglomeration but a collective entity.^{vii}

Victoria became the Empress of India to tie the monarchy and Empire closer together. She accepted the title on the advice of her seventh Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, whose political advice she relied on. She approved of his imperialist policies, which established Britain as the most powerful nation in the world. Her popularity in Britain soared as she became a symbol of empire towards the end of her reign. She wrote in her diary on 1st January 1877:

“My thoughts much taken up with the great event at Delhi today, and in India generally, where I am being proclaimed Empress of India.” Journal entry, 1 January 1877



Victoria and her 'munshi'. Queen Victoria's Letters: A Monarch Unveiled (BBC Four, 2014).

The Queen received Indian servants to mark her Golden Jubilee year. She promoted one, Abdul Karim, to become her personal teacher or 'Munshi'. Karim instructed Victoria in Urdu and Indian affairs and introduced her to curry. He was just 24 but Victoria was fascinated by India, the country she ruled but would never visit. Politicians and members of the royal household resented his position but despite this, Victoria gave him honours and lands in India and took him with her on visits to the French Riviera.^{viii}

Victoria had a special relationship with India throughout her reign. There was a special "durbar" room at Osborne House, her summer retreat on the Isle of Wight. In recent times there has been a lot of focus on the presence of the Munshi in her domestic service. A lot of importance was also given to Sikh regiments at the jubilees of 1887 and 1897. Queen Victoria viewed her Indian Empire with special interest. Both Victoria and Prince Albert played a very important role in the Government of India Act of 1858 and the subsequent transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown. On her accession she became Patron of the Royal Asiatic Society, and quickly became involved in the patronage of the various Indian bishoprics.

Prince Albert was interested in the spiritual aspect of statesmanship in India. Lord Ellenborough was the Governor General of India. Prince Albert and Lord Ellenborough were close to each

other. They disliked the Whigs and their Indian policies of the 1830s. They objected to the cosy relationship the Whigs enjoyed with the bankers and fundholders of the East India Company, and they opposed the Whigs' interventionist stance in Bengal on matters such as the Education Code (the insistence that English become the language of administration), and the attempt to suppress religious "idolatry" and practices such as sati. Victoria became a weapon with which Ellenborough in particular (but supported by Albert and Wellington) fought back at the Whigs.^{ix} As soon as Ellenborough reached India in 1842 he began the unusual procedure of direct communication with the Queen, passing on information and advice that really should have been restricted to confidential correspondence with the Board of Control and the Cabinet.

Then there was Ellenborough's controversial decision to award a medal to the victorious Royal (European) troops in the East India Company regiments in the Queen's name. Queen Victoria's relationship with India, was that of establishing her personal authority independent of the East India Company. At a time when cautious prime ministers such as William Lamb (Viscount Melbourne) and Peel, and her advisors such as Prince Leopold and Baron Stockmar, were reminding her of the limits to her royal prerogative at home, Tories such as Ellenborough and Wellington were extending the limit of her sovereignty in India. In other words, in India in the 1840s Victoria was living up to the reputation of a "warrior queen," to use Walter Arnstein's phrase.^x

The controversy over the Afghan and China medals in 1842 was settled in the Queen's favor, and in 1849 a similar medal was struck and awarded to Crown troops following the successful outcome of the wars against the Sikhs in the Punjab. Indeed, many of the annexations of further Indian territories in the 1840s were marked by a conspicuous display of the personal authority of Queen Victoria. Following the secession of territory to Britain, durbars were held at which Indian chiefs and princes swore allegiance to the Crown. In 1842 Charles Napier, the victorious general in Scinde, organized the durbar to coincide with the Queen's birthday. Moreover, the events of the 1840s gave rise to a style of direct diplomacy between Victoria and individual Indian sovereigns. Armory and portraits were exchanged, and personal friendships struck up with

the Maharajah of Nepal, the Queen of Oudh, and Duleep Singh, who in exile in Britain befriended the young Prince Alfred.^{xi}

In 1851 there was a Great Exhibition in which there was a section on the Indian Court. The highlight was the Kohinoor diamond, taken from the Battle of Lahore in 1842. The Kohinoor diamond is still in England and recently there were reports in the media regarding efforts by the current Indian government to retrieve it. A couple of years later there was an exhibition solely devoted to Indian artefacts which revealed Queen Victoria's love for Indian antiquaries and her interest in the glorious history of India.

The Revolt of 1857 was another incident which revealed the close connection between Queen Victoria and India. Contemporary British periodicals and newspapers highlighted the cruelty with which the sepoys attacked British women and children. Once the rebellion was suppressed Victoria was represented as a benevolent ruler. She led prayers of thanksgiving once victory was confirmed, she was referred to as "Victoria Beatrix," and media depicted her as a virtuous and tolerant ruler prepared to forgive her Indian subjects. Queen Victoria tried to analyse the reasons for the rebellion in India in 1857. She came to the conclusion that Britain had become over reliant on Indian troops and needed a single, integrated army. She also thought that the Indian princes had been mistreated in the years immediately preceding 1857. Many of her concerns became incorporated into the Government of India Bill that was drafted and redrafted throughout the summer and early autumn of 1858. Victoria and Albert insisted on some of the key provisions of the bill: the creation of a single army with one chain of command; a specific commitment by Britain to public works schemes of irrigation and railways; a restriction on the powers and composition of the new advisory Council of India—Victoria was particularly insistent that the new secretary of state (her minister) should have the power to override the Council; the requirement that the Crown see all dispatches relating to India, as in the existing arrangement with the Foreign Office, and that all government proclamations in India be made in Victoria's name; and, finally, the conciliation of the Indian princes, through respect for their religions, and confirmation of their lineage and legitimacy.^{xii}

This last provision—conciliation of the Indian princes became an abiding concern of Albert and Victoria in 1859 and 1860. They came up with the idea of an Indian order of knighthood as a means of rewarding and strengthening the personal bonds of loyalty between Victoria and the many Indian princes who had not rebelled in 1857. This was the “Star of India” Order, or the “Eastern Star,” to give it the working title bestowed by Albert in consultation with the new Secretary of State Charles Wood. The first investiture of the new Order took place in 1861, shortly before Albert died, and routine investitures took place in India during the 1860s and early 1870s, several years before the spectacle of the Raj took over. No wonder Victoria declared, after Albert’s death, that India was his “sacred legacy”.^{xiii}

Conclusion

Thus we observe that unlike earlier sovereigns and even later ones, Queen Victoria shared a special bond with India. Even before her official coronation as Empress of India, in her mind, she already considered herself as Queen of India. We observe that she showed a great deal of consideration and prudence in her relations with the Indian Princes and was statesmanlike in her approach to India.

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Bio

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