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INTRODUCTION

SQUARING ROUND TABLES

On 12 November 1930 King-Emperor George V inaugurated the Round Table Conference (RTC) in the Royal Gallery of the Palace of Westminster. The *Illustrated Weekly of India* noted his awareness that the British Commonwealth itself depended on the constitutional debates over India's future that would take place in the imperial capital.[1] The article also carried a special cartoon by Mrs E. King featuring some notable personalities at the conference (see Figure 1.1). From the turbaned Maharaja of Bikaner, a prominent ruler of the hereditary Indian (or 'princely') states, at the top left, the reader's gaze was directed clockwise around the table. Here awaited caricatures including the leading liberal Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, the Muslim politician M. A. Jinnah, the ex-viceroy Lord Reading, the Maharaja of Patiala, the former law member for the Government of India Sir Muhammed Shafi, the wealthy leader of the Ismaili sect of the Shia Muslim community and chairman of the non-princely, British Indian delegates, the Aga Khan, and Governor of the United Provinces and conference advisor Sir Malcolm Hailey.

Most remarkable are the depictions above and within the circle of conference attendees. Floating above the table are the ghosts at the feast: in from the left waft M. K. Gandhi and V. J. Patel, and from the right Pandits Jawaharlal and Motilal Nehru. These leaders of the Indian National Congress ('Congress') had not only refused to come to London but also launched the civil disobedience movement in response to Britain's failure to confirm the conference's purpose as that of granting India 'Dominion status' (Moore 1974, 97–99). Viceroy Irwin had insisted this was because it was to be a free conference with no set agenda or outcomes. In this belated

FIGURE 1.1 Notable personalities at the Round Table

Source: *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 30 November 1930, © British Library Board (OP 1346).

commitment to liberal free speech, Congress saw yet more dilatory tactics from a colonial government desperately trying to stem the advance of anti-colonial nationalism. The absence of Congress haunted the preparations for the conference and cast a pall over the opening ceremony.

When the plenary sessions began five days later in St James's Palace, however, something remarkable happened. In the opening addresses, first Sapru and then Bikaner came out in favour of an all-India federation, uniting the separate sovereign patchworks of princely and British India. Successive delegates professed their support for federalism, the product of frenetic networking of delegates during the journey to Europe and in the cafés, restaurants, hotel suites and clubs of London since their arrival. Not only would the conference be the first such gathering of the leaders of British and princely states, and the first incorporation of Indian leaders into formal British debates on India's future, but it would also be the first to devise a system of government that would incorporate the whole subcontinent. The resulting Government of India Act (1935) established putative autonomy for provincial governments, allowing Congress to sweep to ascendency in the

1937 elections, and laid the foundations for a future federation combining princely and British India.

When representing this subcontinent, the British cartographic impulse was to depict its divisions (Edney 1997). Official gazetteers mapped a jigsaw of provinces, presidencies and states, the princes in yellow and the British in imperial pink. The *Weekly*'s cartoon, however, portrayed a very different geography, the India encircled by the caricatured attendees exceeding that of trigonometrical surveys and political partitions.

Sumathi Ramaswamy (2010, vii) has reminded us of Rabindranath Tagore's aphorism: 'The Geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one gave up his life for a map.' One response had been Mother India, a geo-body which nationalists could mobilise around and relate to. What we see here is something entirely different. If this India has bodies, they are conference bodies, formally attired and resolutely male. But the territory is recognisable from many of the Mother India depictions, a caricatured India, out of which something national might emerge (Ramaswamy 2010, 42). To the north we see the Himalayas and, beneath them, religious buildings, possibly the Taj Mahal mausoleum at Agra and the Purana Qila tower at Delhi. Across the land are environmental markers of India's tropical otherness: the baking sun, palm trees and a cameleer. But this was not an anti-modern India, whether orientalist or Gandhian, absent of connections with the modern world. Rather, a railway traverses the south; a traditional boat off the western coast rocks in the wake of ocean liners, steaming to Karachi, Bombay or Calcutta; and, swooping perilously close to the Indian sun, passes an airplane, promising new and faster connections to the wider world. Laid out on the round table was a vision of India in motion and in transit, from the old to the new, at conference.

The RTC of 89 delegates was opened on 12 November 1930 and suspended on 19 January 1931.[2] A second session was summoned later in the year, opening on 7 September. Gandhi attended this second session as the sole Congress representative, 1 of 112 delegates who conferred for nearly three months before suspending their work on 1 December. A smaller third session of 46 delegates was opened on 17 November 1932 in a committee room of the House of Lords, and the conference concluded barely a month later, on Christmas Eve. Across these three sessions, the conference sat for 193 days in total, bringing together 128 delegates as well as dozens of staff, expert advisors, journalists, photographers and a global

audience rapt by the agonistic debates between Britain and its largest and most prized colony.

The conference as a whole, however, proved a disappointment to delegates of every persuasion, and the round table itself proved painfully pliable as a metaphor of disenchantment. For Sir Malcolm Hailey, the first session talks had been tortuously slow without getting to the nub of difficult questions, such as which form of federation would be worked towards. By the end of 1930, he suggested, no plans had been laid regarding how the executive would be responsible to a bicameral, two-chamber legislature, while both the princes and British Indian delegates were pushing for legislative chambers in which they would have the upper hand. Writing to Viceroy Irwin on 29 December, Hailey lamented that 'though we have discussed Federation till we are all dizzy (someone has said that the object of having a Round Table was that we might talk in circles) we have never cleared our minds as to the most appropriate of the numerous alternative forms of structure'.[3]

On 19 January 1931, after over two months of deliberation, the Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald suspended the conference, pronouncing that it would have to reconvene after further investigation and debate in India. He could, however, proudly announce the agreement that responsibility for the future Government of India should rest on Indian legislatures, though with reservations and safeguards to protect minority religious communities and ultimate British control. After scares over the communal question and slow progress on federation, most commentators found the first conference session to have been a success, but others saw in it the seeds of intractable problems that would hamper future debates. A recurring trope was the mismatch between the idealised rhetoric of conference talk and the lived realities of life in India, a criticism levelled at interwar liberalism more broadly (Carr [1939] 1993). For the *Observer* editor J. L. Garvin, writing on the eve of MacDonald's announcement, the conference had been one of 'Round Tables and Square Facts', for which two months had not been enough time to reconcile Hindu and Muslim demands, or 'ideals and realities'.[4]

For the *Morning Post*, the conference's attempt at 'Squaring the Round Table' had hit a much deeper conundrum relating to the reconciling of colonialism and democracy that responsibility with safeguards suggested. An editorial on the day of MacDonald's speech argued that the democratic system of the west was alien to India, no matter how much 'theorists' tried to

force it upon the country.[5] Unlike the supposedly united electorate of Britain (no mention was made of Ireland), successive Indian religious minorities had demanded separate representation but failed to agree on 'weightage' and distribution. The British government settling the communal question would signal both an act of coercion and the failure of this experiment with the conference method. In 1932, both came to pass.

The round-table metaphor was also used by those on both sides of Indian opinion regarding the utility or not of the conference. For the barrister and scholar Abdulla Yusuf Ali, the disconnect between Gandhi's non-violent rhetoric and the chaos of civil disobedience exposed the hypocrisy of the Congress campaign. Claiming to speak for right-wing Indian opinion, he suggested that 'Squaring the Circle' of Indian politics, citing Garvin's metaphor, would require patient plodding and cooperative teamwork, not contempt for the law or the sectional rule of the majority.[6]

In contrast, the inaugural edition of the *Indian and Colonial Journal*, founded in London to express the demand of India and other colonies for independence, condemned the conference delegates for being selected by the British and not elected to represent India.[7] Two days before MacDonald's concluding address, the *Journal* published a satirical recap of the RTC, bending the metaphor into merciless geometric skewers, each with an anti-colonial edge.[8] As a geometric 'first principle' the table had been round because Columbus had proved the world to be round when 'he had discovered "America" (Spanish for "end of the world")'. As a geometric 'axiom' all delegates were equal to each other but also equal to anything or nothing. As geometric 'definitions' the angles of British delegates were '*acute*' and those of British Indian delegates were '*obtuse*', while '*parallel* communal *lines* are such that, even if not straight, they do not meet at the Round Table Conference however far they might be extended in either direction'.[9]

If these commentaries took the Round Table to its abstract extremes, other more literal readings were surprisingly absent. It was not until the conclusion of the conference in its third session in December 1932 that official mention was made of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. That an ancient fable concerning the tempering of sovereign rights by both a companionship and principles of honour and chivalry was left out of the imperial narrative is perhaps no surprise. More surprising was the absence of direct connections made between the conference and the Round Table movement. This movement had campaigned for imperial federation

through the early twentieth century and successfully influenced the 1919 Government of India Act through Lionel Curtis's 'dyarchy' scheme (Bosco and May 1997). The fracturing of the empire into national colonial policies after the war had stymied the movement (Sinha 2013), although former *Round Table* journal editor Philip Kerr, as Lord Lothian, was a key player in the conference's second session in the autumn of 1931.

By then a National Government had been forged to tackle the economic crisis of the early 1930s. MacDonald remained as prime minister with a largely Conservative cabinet following the Independent Labour Party's catastrophic defeat in the elections of October 1931. Lothian served as Liberal undersecretary of state for India in the National Government, supporting Gandhi's attendance and hosting him in London with his close friend, Viscountess (Nancy) Astor. Gandhi's arrival transformed the conference, his celebrity dazzling the world's media. He was, however, quickly frustrated by the 'unreality' of the conference and felt that the structure of the meeting and its objectives were incompatible with the desires and needs of the Indian people. Gandhi confessed his inability to reconcile the communal demands of the delegates, and the second session ended in a palpable atmosphere of failure.

Though for most commentators the round-table metaphor had run its course by then, Gandhi's frustration at the mismatch between the structure and motives of the conference and the demands of the Indian people cut to the quick of the problem. That is, how could a colonial government unwilling to grant full self-government use a free conference to set its policy? It could either surreptitiously limit the capacities of the conference for free speech or select delegates who would speak freely only in certain ways. These attempts to square the circle were certainly geometrically complex, as the *Indian and Colonial Journal* had lampooned to great effect. At its most abstract, the square was colonial autocracy, imposing a bureaucratic iron cage on Indian life. The circle was liberalism, a dynamo driven by freedom, questioning and agency. Squaring the circle was the challenge of the conference, but also the broader challenge of twentieth-century colonial Indian politics.

This challenge has been studied from various disciplinary perspectives. One historical approach is to consider the paradoxes of colonial democracy, linked to but outside of western experiences of democratisation, where rights-bearing citizens emerged not in the public domain of the state and civil society but through social relationships of mobilisation, activism

and tutorship (Chatterjee 1993, 2004). A political philosophical approach considers the ways in which the liberal tradition accommodated and justified the existence of empire through grappling with colonial difference (Mehta 1999). A further sociological framing presents the lens of sequentiality, considering how a stadial view of development was used to defer progress in 'Eastern' societies until they achieved the impossible feat of meeting the preconditions supposedly reached by societies in the 'West' (Kaviraj 2005). This placed them, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 8) put it, in the 'waiting room of history'.

Drawing upon these disciplinary approaches, this book proposes a historical geographical reading that puts the spaces of the conference front and centre of the analysis in four ways. First, it explores the way the conference imagined new political geographies of India, experimenting not only with federation but also with dominion, dyarchy and community. Second, it considers how the conference was made to happen through infrastructures of political method, people and place. Third, it considers London as the unnamed but dominant delegate at the round table, expanding the conference remit beyond its palace locations to the official, social and domestic geographies of the capital. And, finally, the book concludes by considering the spatiality of the conference as a representational event. It was contested as unrepresentative through written petitions and protests in the street, and was ultimately represented as a failure, because of its diminished third session and through the consensus of most involved that the conference had failed. This was despite its results leading directly to the 1935 Government of India Act.

This book, therefore, revisits earlier explanations of squaring the circle not from a geometrical but from a geographical perspective. Colonial democracy is explored here not through debates on legislature configuration or Lothian's Franchise Committee but through seeing how representation, speech and decision-making operated in the London meeting itself – that is, through viewing the conference as a space in which colonial democracy was practised, not a space in which it was devised. Liberalism and empire are also depicted here through the conference method, which was lifted from a post-war liberal internationalist tradition and put to work for imperial aims. Again, while liberty and freedom were invoked often enough in the plenary discussions, the conference itself is posed as an exemplar of interwar imperialism in a liberal vein. Finally, sequentiality pulsed through the conference organisation, postponing certain advances (such as Dominion

status) while insisting that other stages had to be arrived at (including a communal settlement) before a federal structure could be settled upon. The British organisers, behind the flimsy façade of an open agenda, governed the conference through procedure and committee, enforcing temporal sequencing through the technologies of the minute, the circular and the chit.

This power worked, in part, to achieve traditional divide and rule. Selecting delegates who could not and would not agree a communal settlement, and weighing provincial and commercial interests against each other, fated the conference to a degree of failure. But as a conference in liberal form, the mechanisms of division were also more subtle and complex than *divide et impera* alone. Conference organisers were, and were seen to be, desperate to fulfil every whim of the delegates. London was turned out to dazzle the delegates and furnish them with every gustatory pleasure. In part this was a self-consciously geographical ploy of depoliticisation. How many tea parties, receptions, exhibitions, lectures and soirees could one attend and remain antagonistically nationalist? But the tactic was also one of structuring speech. Imperialism operated here not through the violent policing of what was said and recorded (Ogborn 2019) but rather it granted the liberal freedom to speak at length in a conference structured so as to have relatively few conclusions open to it.

The broader research on conferences and colonial geographies that have influenced the writing of this book is outlined below. This is followed by showing how the RTC has been studied in political and constitutional histories, introducing its pre-eminent personalities and exploring how federalism functioned as its dominant aim.

CONFERENCES AND GEOGRAPHIES

Though the most significant conference in the history of India up to that point, the RTC is entirely absent from the broader literature on political conferences. India had been represented by its secretary of state at Britain's nineteenth-century Colonial Conferences and its twentieth-century Imperial Conferences, until it achieved self-representation at the 1917 Imperial War Conference (Sundaram 1930). Being a meeting solely between the British state and Indian representatives, however, the RTC does not feature in accounts of these conferences (Ollivier 1954). Similarly, the RTC does not feature in the tallies of international conferences in the

interwar years, which proliferated under the direct patronage and indirect inspiration of the League of Nations (Grandjean and Van Leeuwen 2019). Too colonial to be imperial, too imperial to be international, the Round Table Conference is categorised as a national political event only.

The ultimate success of the nationalist cause allows us to retrospectively place the RTC not so much as a latecomer to the tradition of British Colonial and Imperial Conferences but as a forerunner of the conferences which facilitated imperial decolonisation. This involves placing it in an historical and international lineage that includes but exceeds India and placing it in an intellectual linage that includes but exceeds South Asian studies.

The RTC is explored in this book first and foremost as a conference. The interwar period witnessed an explosion of international conferences, covering a new and expansive range of topics and agendas. These new spaces of internationalism had their origins in two historical forms of international meeting (Mazower 2012). An older tradition of diplomatic congresses had emerged to settle territorial disputes, while newer forms of periodic meeting had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century through scientific, technical and commercial conferences (Heffernan et al. 2021). The Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920) combined these traditions, bringing together scientific experts, diplomats and politicians (Dunn 1929; Hill 1929; Nicolson 1939). The art of modern conferencing was transformed and became an object of self-conscious study, as pioneered by another product of the resulting Treaty of Versailles. The League of Nations functioned as a near-permanent conference, establishing models of good, liberal, international conference practice and inspiring others to emulate its methods, regardless of their political bent (Legg 2020a). The 'conference method' (Dunn 1929, v) came to dominate international relations and the method was liberal, in its prioritising transparency over secrecy, participation over exclusion and cooperation over competition.

This conference method proved pliable, which was the key to its profusion and its turning to non-liberal ends (on this as a trait of internationalism more broadly, see Sluga and Clavin [2016]). The RTC was an example of the conference method being adapted as an imperial tool, even if this was the liberal face of an empire in the process of brutally suppressing civil disobedience in India at the time. But anti-colonialists had also adapted the conference method successfully to their ends. The Pan-African Congress (Hodder 2021) and the League against Imperialism (Louro 2018), for instance, all turned the conference form to their

requirements in the interwar years. After the war, international conferences provided the means for networking together African and Asian campaigns for decolonisation and post-colonial non-alignment with Cold War politics (Hodder 2015; Pham and Shilliam 2016; Stolte 2019).

This helps us see how the RTC was part of an imperial conference lineage that adopted the liberal conference method but whose cosmopolitan Indian participants anticipated later anti- and post-colonial forms of conferencing. The study of these conferences has helped create a new diplomatic history of both conferencing and internationalism (Dittmer and McConnell 2015; Legg et al. 2021; Scott-Smith and Weisbrode 2019). Pivotal meetings in the genealogy sketched above have been revisited and reappraised. In such a vein the Congress of Vienna (1815) has been explored through the salon politics of both the men and women of the city, the artefacts it left in its wake and the way it conjured the geographies of Europe and the Mediterranean for deliberation (Vick 2014). The geography of conferences is vital here not only in terms of geopolitical location but also through the sense of place that the organisers draw upon and created (Shimazu 2014; Leow 2019). Recent literature has opened the study of international conferences to a broader range of actors and regions and encouraged an openness of approach that mirrors the experimentation and innovation put to work by Asian and African delegates in the late colonial and early post-colonial periods (Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective 2018; Burton 2010; Lewis and Stolte 2019).

The methodology adopted in this book is indebted to such works and also draws lessons from studies of the geographies of conferencing more broadly, which direct us to attend to the production of knowledge, performance and protest at such events (Craggs and Mahony 2014). It also adapts many of the lessons emerging from studies of internationalism, which explore unexpected spaces and sites, which connect abstract concepts and embodied performances and which highlight hybridisations of different forms of internationalism (Hodder, Legg and Heffernan 2015; Raza, Roy and Zachariah 2015).

The international relations scholar Fred Halliday (1988) categorised forms of internationalism into a triad, and the Round Table Conference can be considered to have hybridised all three of these forms. In its adaptation of the conference method, the RTC hybridised a 'liberal' international tradition with the 'hegemonic' or 'imperial' internationalism of the British Empire (Jerónimo and Monteiro 2017). In welcoming anti-colonial