

After 1857 rebellion, Delhi properties of 'disloyal' Indians were confiscated

In 'The (Un)governable City', Raghav Kishore writes about the transformation of Delhi into a cantonment in the aftermath of the Great Rebellion of 1857.

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Capture of Delhi, 1857. Coloured lithograph by Bequet Freres | National Army Museum, UK | Wikimedia Commons

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As the British forces re-took the city in 1857, the army was given a free hand in ransacking houses and *mohallas*, and 'prize agents' confiscated a huge amount of valuable items, which were later sold in European markets. Along with this, came military orders that the residents of the city were to evacuate their houses so that the city could be made 'safe'. While Hindu residents of the city were allowed to return in 1858, Muslims were kept out for another year, and their houses seized by the army as 'confiscated property'. Presumed to be the real conspirators behind the rebellion, Delhi's Muslim residents faced the full wrath of the colonial government by virtue of having their places of worship and other symbols of power seized and occupied as barracks by British troops. This capture and desecration was, as one historian described it, an 'intentional desacralisation' project where symbols of the rebellion like the Jama Masjid and the palace were metamorphosed by the victors.

However, significant to note here is that the pillage of Delhi was not condoned by all sections of the imperial administration. Indeed, the question of compensation to both English and native subjects emerged almost as immediately as that of retribution. John Lawrence, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, and later, Viceroy of India, was particularly opposed to the presence of military forces in the city and condemned the acts of plunder that were taking place in north India. For Lawrence, the restoration of property rights needed to be at the heart of any reconstruction of British authority in India. As a senior administrator with several years of experience governing areas like the Punjab and Delhi, he was of



the opinion that natives had to be compensated for the losses they suffered. He argued in his correspondence to Viceroy Canning that unless there was 'some security to lives and property of the natives', tranquillity in cities like Delhi was not possible. Yet, such liberal behaviour of officials like Lawrence was contingent on the question of 'loyalty'.

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Compensation, after all, could not be separated from the political exigencies of the government, and in Lawrence's mind, the rationale of compensation was to favour those 'influential men' who were needed to re-establish the reins of the empire. In a letter to the Commissioner of Hissar, E. Brandreth, a man who would later oversee the compensation process in Delhi, Lawrence wrote about how 'influential' men (even Muslims) were to be given every consideration for the restoration of their lands and properties:

It is in my mind very impolitic being very severe in such cases [of confiscations]. General confiscations are to be deplored, and only endorsed in great and exceptional cases. If we deprive large number of influential men of their proprietary rights, we give them the strongest inducements to resist.

In concurrence, Viceroy Canning also declared, 'A loyal native is the last man who should go uncompensated if there is compensation as such', and he agreed with the thrust of Lawrence's argument that 'loyalty' should be a prerequisite for compensation. Like Lawrence's views, this was a tacit indication that political expediency would guide the liberality of the government in matters of compensation. Canning also favoured a discrete method of compensation to save the government from doling out large sums of money. He felt that the best way to avoid numerous 'loyal' claimants from approaching the government with a litany of their complaints and losses was to allow local officials to decide cases on the ground. When a dispatch was released in December 1857, which suggested that a commission of enquiry was to be formed in the disturbed districts to settle the question of compensation, Canning expressed his dismay to the Secretary of State:

I am now inclined to think that the instructions can be executed in a quieter way and by means less ostentatious and at the same time more effective than a commission—and that is by the officers of each Division and District. There will

be some little gain in this. It will have less of the appearance of a deliberate determination to compensate.

This policy of local arbitration was based on Canning's faith that the 'liberal' impulses of the officials would guide them through the compensation process, but with strict adherence to the economy. Thus, any mode of compensation at the level of the bureaucracy had to negotiate such demands made by the government of India: the need to identify loyal residents of cities who had sided with the government during the rebellion, to make concessions for influential men who would then be relied upon as intermediaries, to create a mechanism of compensation that would be cost-effective, and thus, reduce the financial liabilities of the government.

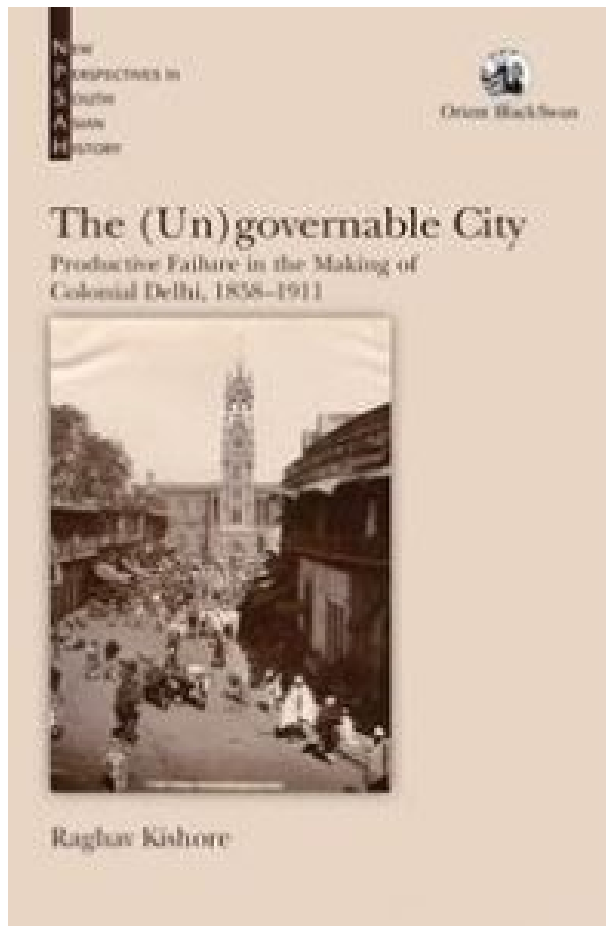
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Military clearance, finances and bureaucratic responsibilities

As the likes of Canning and Lawrence deliberated over the nature of compensation, both civil and military authorities had control over the city of Delhi. It has been suggested that this joint civil and military control in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion gave a fillip to the commodification and exchange of urban property in Delhi. This argument is elucidated to explain that while the domains of the two authorities were demarcated eventually, the fear and threat of insurrection resulted in an absolute space of power, that is, in the fusion of the military and civil domains. With the ability to use violence on its side, the state was able to have a much freer role in the eventual commodification of property. It is right to suggest that the military and civil authorities were indeed working together at that time, but the implied fusion of the two domains gives too much direction and linearity to the operations of the government. This cooperation also needs to be contextualised in the context of the government of India's own involvement in the matter, and its intervention in the development of a compensation scheme. The development of a market in property, which was the eventual result of this process, was thus not an inevitable outcome of state dominance, but became by default, a way of responding to the many tensions that were accommodated in the scheme of compensation in Delhi.

In order to create a visible line of control from the palace, where the troops were being stationed, it was decided by the military that an area of 400 yards needed to be cleared free from habitation. As mentioned earlier, by 1858, the Hindu residents of Delhi had been allowed to re- enter the city, and in the following year, re-entry permission was granted to those Muslims who could prove that they had not participated in the rebellion. The order by the military authorities for a 400-yard clearance meant that a densely populated area dotted with houses, *bazaars* (markets), mansions, reservoirs and offices was to be cleared by the PWD through a series of systematic demolitions. Sources suggest that the area in question was densely populated; locations such as *Katra Dhobi* (washer men's quarters) near the Jama Masjid and *Kaghazi Mohalla* (paper makers' neighbourhood) in the eastern half of the city meant that along with valuable houses of nobles and their retinues, *karkhanas* (workshops) and gardens, the area also contained

occupational or caste quarters. Moreover, by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, properties began to be sold to buyers from different caste or social backgrounds, and the name of the *mohalla* may not have necessarily reflected a homogenous caste or an occupational group in residence. Thus, the line of demolitions engulfed a heterogeneous mix of houses and buildings either owned by individuals or perhaps containing different rights to land. Two issues confronted the local authorities, both military and civil, if these demolitions were to be carried out. The fact that individuals, largely Hindus but including some Muslim notables, had already been allowed to re-enter the city, meant that they had been deemed 'loyal' by the government. Moreover, they had also been allowed possession of their house property. Any clearances within the 400-yard area would comprise the properties or landed rights of such loyal individuals who would have to be ejected again. Therefore, this opened up the question of how these individuals were to be brought under the process of compensation. The second issue was related to the cost of the demolitions. How were the demolitions to be financed when the imperial government was fixated on spending the least possible amount on financial outlays?



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