BEYOND THE VISIBLE: THE CASE OF DELHI DURBAR FILMS

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Early documentary cinema, often known as the topical or actuality, flourished at the turn of the century and was modelled on the contemporary illustrated newspapers and pictorial magazines. The actuality, predecessor of the newsreel, created a new form of hunger for visual information among its nameless spectators who had never experienced anything like this before. Publicity slogans such as 'Nature on Stage' or 'We Put the World Before You' raised the contemporary viewers' desire for a new kind of 'naturalistic spectacles'. Punctuated with conclusive, if not provocative, title cards the silent actuality combined texts with moving images and provided definitive meanings for the benefit of its new and uninitiated spectators, and thus became a new mode of information. Film historian Michael Chanan observes that the early actualities made history out of the present and provided not only a new mode of production of human perception but also inspired a new way of looking at the contemporary world.² Indeed, the techno-mechanical process of recording fragments of contemporary life 'in motion' and the re-presenting the same again as life-like 'spectacles' provoked what Walter Benjamin has termed as 'simultaneous collective reception' in the public domain. Gradually, these films inherited the narrative and cultural conventions of the existing visual media such as photography, the illustrated magazine and the magic lantern and became a unique instrument to record and interpret contemporary life itself. As the early actuality cinema was soon recognized as a new form of documentation, filmmakers became more conscious in their selection of subjects and their representations.³ Yet, in the process of recording significant events of contemporary life the makers of the early actuality films acquired the status of 'news-writers with camera' and one of the most celebrated moments in the history of actuality was when the Pope, realizing that the movie camera was focused on him and was being cranked, stopped and blessed the camera.4

In colonial India, the production and circulation of news and images for mass consumption remained a subject of concern within the greater institutional system of empire building that at times directly encouraged and even authored many such newsworthy 'events'. It was indeed the over-arching imperial euphoria that was instrumental in utilizing every mode of communication to glorify the so called 'imperial cause'. Magic lantern slide sets manufactured for popular consumption included titles such as Glimpses of India, Soldiers of Britain, Soldiers of the Queen, India and the Colonies, Britons and the Boers and served as models for the actuality films which further popularized the military and naval themes by glorifying the monarchy and its 'primitive subjects races'. The pseudo-militaristic actualities were generally directed to cater to a particular kind of imperial jingoism and considering their growing popularity, the filmmakers started to fake military and naval 'themes' freely. These 'manufactured' films were exhibited as 'authentic' and 'faithful' documentation of history-as-ithappened, and the effect of these films on the uninitiated public was incalculable. Some of the faked Boer War films were presented as definitive and irreversible 'truth' to the viewing public and were consumed voraciously. Indeed, the actualities which included the 'real', the 'faked' and the 'enacted' footage, grounded themselves on strong popular political/ ideological beliefs and expectations and were providing the images people wanted to see. Though the makers of 'actualities' often picked up their 'topics' instinctively, they had realized very early that imperial patriotism was a profitable subject and acted accordingly.⁵ They happily found the imperial government willing enough to support the productions by allowing its army to fake battle scenes and the generals to pose for the camera. The imperial government was indeed one of the first to discover the medium's propagandistic potential in projecting a definitive imperial world-view and was ready to even invent ideal 'events' for mass consumption? ⁶

Public display of power was considered one of the popular tools of colonial governance and the imperial government was engaged in a continuous process of devising and organizing *invited* spectacles in order to project a popular vision of the empire worldwide. These 'theatres of power', the coronations, royal ceremonies, weddings, royal visits, jubilees, colonial exhibitions and the Empire Day celebrations and

last but not the least, the Delhi Durbars - were all tailor-made public spectacles that endorsed the ideology of popular imperialism. The imperial euphoria was further reinforced through the actuality which reproduced those spectacles and circulated them throughout the empire and beyond. Such 'theatres of power' ritualistically celebrating the imperial glory perfectly complemented those pseudo-militaristic actuality dealing with the might of the empire. The idea of holding a Durbar ceremony as a majestic spectacle was originally conceived by Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, and was modelled on the mighty Durbars of the Mughal emperors. The Delhi Durbar of 1911 was the third and last of such 'theatres of power' and was attended by the King and Queen of England and representatives from all princely states of India. This overarching display of imperial power was also the first Indian spectacle to be widely covered by cinema with the direct patronage of the colonial government. Several actualities were made on the Durbar as cameramen, both Indian and foreign, employed by different companies covered the entire ceremony in detail. The lengthiest film on the Durbar was made in Kinemacolor by Charles Urban, the American entrepreneur. Released in 1912 the two and half hour long film Durbar at Delhi was 'shot on location by Urban and a crew of twenty three cameramen.'8 There were at least two British companies who also covered the Durbar along with Indian entrepreneurs like Hiralal Sen. The Charles Urban film remained an ideal example of what David Spurr has termed 'colonial self-inscription'.

'Here, from the start, film demonstrated the powerful ideological service it was capable of rendering to the state. It projected the reputation of power which, as Thomas Hobbes said, *is* power. Film showed the show of force and status which the state had always employed, but it carried it into the furthest corners of the kingdom where it had never really reached before.'

Interestingly, despite the possibility of exploiting the films for publicizing the glory of the empire, the Durbar films, including Hiralal Sen's film which was shown in episodes¹¹ were banned in India soon after their public release.¹² The recorded footage contained a small but sensitive incident considered highly detrimental to the much-

cherished imperial self-image in the background of increasing hostility against the British rule. The incident recorded in the Durbar Films involved Sayaji Rao Gaekwad, the Maharaja of Baroda, who was regarded as one of the most progressive and educated rulers of India.

An elaborate plan was made for the Durbar spectacle, ¹³ the formal crowning of George V as King-Emperor of India. A huge amphitheatre was built for the purpose to accommodate the senior administrators, the maharajas of the princely states, the press and the selected audience in definitive hierarchical order. A rehearsal was held a day before the actual ceremony exclusively for those selected invitees who would pay tribute to the King-Emperor. Invitation was sent to all maharajas and princes along with a copy of the programme requesting them to take part in the rehearsal and to make sure that the event would be flawless. The idea was

'to instruct the princes in the proper form of offering homage to the King- Emperor and his consort. They were told to walk up the steps of the platform, bow low before each of their majesties, and then walk backward down the steps in such a fashion as never to show their back to the royal couple.'

Moreover, the Gaekwad, who was 'unable to attend the rehearsal and sent his brother to take notes for him' wrote to the viceroy earlier suggesting alterations in the arrangement which further infuriated Lord Hardinge. The Gaekwad's absence was taken as a sign of abhorrence and a deliberate attempt to undermine the seriousness of the forthcoming occasion. Foreign Department records show that at the amphitheatre every move of the Gaekwad was closely observed and noted down in detail. For example, it was recorded that after arriving at the amphitheatre the Gaekwad 'divested himself of the jewellery he was wearing except his stars and medals and handed them over to his son who was seated behind him'. ¹⁵ What happened next was even more serious and a report published in Times, London, described the incident in detail and the public reaction:

'Private letters received by last mail from Delhi testify to the general indignation provoked amongst Indians as well as amongst Europeans by the Gaekwad's behavior at the imperial Durbar. When he came up to do homage he walked up jauntily swinging a stick in his handin itself a gross breach of etiquette -and as he passed before their maiesties he saluted in the most perfunctory manner. Very few people believe that his discourtesy was not deliberate, for he had already displayed studied insolence in his attitude towards the Governor General at an earlier stage of proceedings. When Lord Hardinge drove into the arena the Gaekwad rose from the seat barely for a moment as his Excellency's carriage passed, and then he re-seated himself, ostentatiously stretching his legs, whilst everyone else in the vast amphitheatre remained standing till the Governor General had himself taken his seat.

The feeling aroused by these incidents among the ruling chiefs is described as having been one of profound resentment and disgust, '16

The behaviour of the Gaekwad at the Durbar was seen as a clear breach of royal etiquette, an insult to the royal majesties and a challenge to the imperial power itself. The British newspapers carried daily reports of their majesties' travel to India and covered all programmes and ceremonies attended by them. The Times, known for its pro-empire attitude, took special interest in the Durbar incident and published a review immediately after the films were released at the Empire Theatre and Palace Theatre of London. The review augmented the popular belief that the camera was such 'an unimpeachable mechanical witness' whose authenticity could not be questioned. Though the advertisements of the shows published on 1st January did not highlight the incidents at all, the Empire Theatre's advertisement published on 2nd January supported the Times reporting by mentioning that their film depicted 'every important function during their Majesties' visit to Delhi' and 'the Gaekwad of Baroda' was mentioned as one of the highlights of the programme.¹⁷ The Timex reviewed the films with the heading 'The Durbar in Pictures: The Gaekwad of Baroda's attitude.' The reviewer commented,

'But the pictures' will probably excite most attention in that they contain the accounts telegraphed to this country with regard to the conduct at the Durbar of the Gaekwad of Baroda. The Empire pictures in particular, taken at a very close range, are especially clear on the point. There could hardly be a more striking contrast than between the ceremonial situation of the Nizam of Hyderabad, full of sincerity and solemn significance, and the apparently indifferent attitude of the Gaekwad of Baroda. Dressed in white and carrying a cane, the latter approaches the Royal throne after the Nizam of Hyderabad, bows only in a perfunctory manner, retreats a pace or two, then turns his back on the king and walks slowly away. The incident could be so clearly followed at the Empire last night a storm of disapproval greeted the Gaekwad's conduct...'18

Though the films had acquired the status of evidence and generated popular interest it appears from the advertisements that the films were shown only for a few days and were surprisingly quickly withdrawn and not advertised further. But interestingly, on 29th January, the *Illustrated London News* reproduced a series of film frames highlighting the Gaekwad's misconduct and by freezing specific frames the magazine was successful in fixing the dominant interpretation of the incident once again. Gaekwad himself was reportedly 'stunned and shocked' by the publicity given to his 'misconduct' and 'disloyal attitude' towards the crown. Actually, immediately after the Durbar, sensing the outrage of the British officials, the Gaekwad wrote a letter to the viceroy on G. K. Gokhale's advice clarifying his behaviour,

'After bowing, I receded a few steps and turned round to ask which way to go. I was under the impression that I had actually descended by the proper passage, but I am told I did not. Having turned to ask the way, I became confused, and continued to walk around. For this mistake, I can only say how sincerely sorry I am.'20

The Times published the Gaekwad's letter of apology on 18th December, 1912 while the Pioneer published a sarcastic article by Kier Hardy, a member of the British parliament, in which he mockingly praised the Gaekwad for setting an example before the Indian princes and for teaching them 'how to grovel low before the Throne, as becomes all who go near such a symbol of imbecility.' ²¹ The article was reproduced widely both in India and England and was instrumental in influencing public opinion. Yet there was a lot of confusion among the public. Was the 'misconduct' of the Gaekwad, who was well acquainted with European customs and etiquette, intentional and seditious or just accidental? Bernard S. Cohn comments,

'The intentions of the Gaekwad are less relevant than his failure to maintain the dress code expected of Indian princes. The most seditious touch of all would seem to have been the Gaekwad's use of a walking stick, an accourrement of the white sahibs, military and civilian, which marked the insouciance they displayed in the presence of the Indian masses?.' ²²

In colonial India dress codes played a crucial role in delineating the power relationship, authority, hierarchy and subjugation and had an overarching ideological and symbolic function in social life. For example the turban, the typical Indian headgear, had epitomized the significance of dress code. Nineteenth century guide books warned the 'Englishmen traveling to India . . . never to touch a Hindu's or a Muslim's turban, as this was considered a grave insult'. Symbolic gifting of a turban to one with superior power, or placing it at the feet of a king meant total submission to the authority of the 'other'. During each visit of the British royalty, especially during the previous Delhi Durbars of 1877 and 1903, the maharajas of the princely states presented turbans to the throne as their symbolic acceptance of British sovereignty. It was in the Durban court where Gandhi for the first time realized the significance of dress code in a much-publicized incident when he was asked by a white magistrate to remove his turban which he refused.

Ironically; a few years later, in a changed political scenario, the Bombay High Court banned wearing of the typical 'Gandhi cap' — popularized by the Indian National Congress — in courts but allowed turban which was considered a neutral headdress.²⁴ After returning to India, Gandhi, and subsequently the entire Congress leadership — 'many of whom were completely westernized — had to adopt a distinct form of Indian dress which was visibly not influenced by the west. Indeed, as early as in 1830, the East India Company had banned its employees from wearing Indian dress in public functions because adapting Indian life style and behaving like 'white nababs' signified a loss of 'Britishness' and thus breaking the barrier between colonizer and its other. Such orientalization of the members of the white rulers was seen as a threat to the very principle of colonial governance and official stricture was issued to all colonial administrators once India was formally annexed to the British empire. The British education and culture popularized wearing of hat among the English educated Indians whose dress remained a subject of contempt in popular plays and cinema. The popularity of the home-spinned 'khaddar' among the Indian nationalists, many of whom were English-educated, indicated a conscious longing for an indigenous dress code epitomizing the spirit of nationalism. Gandhi went as far as wearing a loin cloth symbolizing the only 'dress' of millions of Indians living far below the poverty line. At the famous 'Round Table Conference' Gandhi's 'dress' infuriated the British and the white press ridiculed him as the 'naked fakir' of India. Cohn observes that in the colonial context 'clothes are not just body coverings and matters of adornment, nor can they be understood only as metaphors of power and authority, nor as symbols; in many contexts clothes literally *are* authority. ²⁵ It is only natural that a critique of colonialism could be unfolded around a series of dress codes and the Gaekwad's misconduct at the Delhi Durbar was serious enough to exasperate the representatives and protectors of the imperial power. By dressing in western fashion with a hat and cane at the Durbar where he was supposed to be in his full princely attire and not consciously de-orientalizing his appearance, the Gaekwad had definitely crossed the invisible border between 'them' and 'us'.

However, deliberate violation of the 'dress code' — Gaekwad's iconic display of disloyalty — at the Delhi Durbar was not the only crime committed by him. Indeed, such violation, accidentally or otherwise, would not normally justify any comprehensive political action against the Gaekwad and the sovereign state of Baroda. 'Accounts of what actually occurred at Delhi remain, even now confused and contradictory' commented Copland and it is evident that the confusion persists despite the 'official interpretation' of the incident and the actualities presented as evidence. In fact, it would be inappropriate to make definitive conclusion or assess the incident without further contextualizing it in contemporary political history and reading the film footage carefully against grain. ²⁶ Was there something beyond what was visible in the Durbar films?

During his rule Sayaji Rao Gaekwad, regarded as the most educated ruler and progressive reformer with liberal ideals, made Baroda one of the most advanced princely states under the British. Ian Copland's commendable study of his conflict with the British administrators reveals that,

'... Sayaji Rao struggled to put his precepts into practice. Between 1881 and 1904 the administration was streamlined; free, compulsory primary education introduced (for the first time in India) on an experimental basis; local self-government begun; industries were set up with government assistance; and banks and cooperative societies established to provide a cheap source of rural credit'.²⁷

Gaekwad's ambitious and uncompromising reform measures were perhaps too radical for the British compared to overall economic and social development in other parts of the country under direct British control. For example, the Gaekwad had banned the practice of untouchablility before Gandhi and discouraged the practice of 'parda' among the ladies. To revamp the adininistration he appointed Romesh Chandra Dutt, the noted historian and former government administrator, as Revenue Commissioner in 1904, a post the latter held for two years. The appointment caused resentment among the British administrators, as Dutt had earlier accused the British Government in his infamous 'Open

Letters' to Lord Curzon for implementing a faulty land revenue policy which he believed was the cause of famines in India.²⁸ Yet, the uncompromising Gaekwad once again invited Dutt, who had become the President of Indian National Congress in 1907, to join in as the Dewan of Baroda in 1909 which he accepted and worked till his untimely death later that year. The British had a few more reasons to be worried about the Gaekwad's pro-nationalist sentiment, and his ever-increasing contact with the leaders of Indian nationalist movement and even with the 'terrorists'. Aurobindo Ghose, the Bengal revolutionary, was the vice-principal of Baroda College from 1902 to 1906 and was later implicated in the attempted assassination of Lord Minto, Viceroy and Governor General of India from 1905 to 1910. Aurobindo started his political activities in Baroda and his series of political writings published in *Induprakash* made him a suspect. From Baroda he established contact with revolutionaries working in other parts of the country and sent his agent to Bengal to organize underground terrorist organizations. He left Baroda in 1906 and came to Bengal to propagate his revolutionary ideals. During his stay in Baroda political activists from Maharashtra and Bengal visited Aurobindo regularly. Though the C.I.D. believed that Baroda had become a centre of terrorist conspiracy with Sayaji Rao's patronage, they had little evidence to implicate the Sayaji Rao directly. The Intelligence Department, aware of his connection with organizations like Agra Samaj and Sarvajanik Sabha, reported that during his travel abroad the Gaekwad met legendary nationalist Shyamaji Krishnavarma, the founder of Home Rule Society and the *Indian Sociologist* Taraknath Das, editor of *Free India* and Madam R. D. Cama, the firebrand revolutionary living in Paris having close contact with her Indian counterparts. ²⁹ This was enough for the British intelligence to make the Gaekwad a suspect. Sensing that the growing rift between him and the Indian government might further curtail his power as a sovereign ruler, a very disturbed Gaekwad attempted to resolve the tension during the coronation of George V in 1910. This failed to yield result as he was not allowed to meet the king. 'The Case of Seditious Baroda Officials' was strengthened further in July- August 1911 by the discovery of a bulk of revolutionary literature printed in Baroda for future distribution, and assessing the development the British officials concluded,

'There remains only one policy of vigorous action and the application, if necessary, of force majeure. We must strike at the head of the anti-British movement in Baroda, and the head is the Maharaja Himself.'30

The British administration, toying with the idea of dethroning the Gaekwad, discussed a possible action plan in the Viceroy's council in early November, 1911, where a hesitant Lord Hardinge feared 'that the approaching Delhi Durbar might be marred with pro-Gaekwad sentiment' if extreme measure was to be taken against him and the state of Baroda.³¹ The viceroy commented, 'But should His Highness adopt a different attitude or suggest abdication, we should (restore to) even more forcible measures'. 32 Cleansing the local administration of pro-nationalist elements and forcing the Gaekwad to publicly condemn 'sedition against the British Crown and the Government of India' was the foremost agenda of the viceroy" Yet, considering the immense popularity of the Gaekwad, Lord Hardinge wanted to take time to prepare the stage properly and wait for the right opportunity for the showdown. A harsher measure such as dethroning the Gaekwad at this stage was out of the question because it would be a repeat of what had already been done once. The administrators were too concerned about the manner the previous ruler of Baroda, Malharrao Gaekwad, had been framed in a false case of arsenic poisoning by the Resident of Baroda, Robert Phayre and was eventually deposed in 1877. The furore that followed throughout India immediately at that time seriously maligned the imperial self-image and the incident became the subject of a popular Bengali play and a Marathi novel. Nevertheless, the limited public exhibition of the Durbar films in London and banning of the same in India, the press coverage, and the overall negative publicity given to the incident by the colonial government had a snowball effect against the Gaekwad and the state of Baroda. It was precisely in the background of this crucial political development that the Delhi Durbar 'incident' took place involving the unwilling Sayaji Rao, who according to the Foreign Department Report, 'had no intention of being in India' at the time of crowning of the King-Emperor.

For the Gaekwad the Durbar ceremony provided a space to display his frustration against the British conspiracy to dethrone him. The protest was skilfully designed by the Gaekwad who took a calculated risk in disregarding the royal etiquette by breaking the dress code and more significantly by his final ghastly gesture — turning his back to their royal majesties. Bewildered onlookers, who could do nothing to stop it but witnessed the gesture communicating the message of protest to the master of the ceremony. The Gaekwad pretended to be one of those pathetic and typical 'ignorants of the East' — who did not know the royal etiquette. His letter of apology further confused the critics as well as his nationalist friends. But, the situation got even more complicated as newspapers reported yet another earlier 'immoral misconduct' of the Gaekwad during his previous visit to London where he was implicated in the Statham vs. Statham divorce case 'as one of the lovers of the wife'. In this connection, significantly enough, the British Court had observed that Baroda was a sovereign state and the British laws were not applicable as such. As a result the colonial administrators, despite their partial success in mobilizing public opinion both in India and England, could not dare to dispose him altogether in absence of any hard evidence of sedition and only on the basis of his 'misbehaviour'. That left only one alternative: tightening the British control on the Baroda administration and forcing the Gaekwad to declare his loyalty to the empire publicly. It is not clear whether the Gaekwad had anticipated such backlash and whether he was prepared to face the consequences. Indeed, in January 1912, the unwilling Sayaji Rao Gaekwad, 'accepted' the 'reform' measures proposed by Lord Hardinge in exchange for his throne. The proposal directed the Gaekwad

'i. to convene a special 'durbar' to deliver a Government-drafted speech condemning the nationalists,

ii. to make his press laws as stringent as those in British India,

iii. To accept a British officer as his police chief, and

iv. to dismiss and deport from his state, certain of his officials.'34

With this 'reform' measure ensuring tighter control over the sovereign state of Baroda, the British administrators had partially succeeded in disciplining the Gaekwad.

The use of the Durbar films as 'unwitting testimonial of history' only strengthened the Government's desire to define its film policy in clearer terms and to regulate the future use of cinema in the colonies.

Notes:

- 1. Chanan, Michael, The Dream That Kicks, London, 1980, p 272.
- 2. Chanan, ibid.
- 3. Hughes, William, 'The Evaluation of Film as Evidence', in Smith, Paul (ed) *The Historian and Film*, London, 1976, pp-49-79.
- 4. This silent footage was shown during the touring British Council Division's world-wide exhibition during the centenary celebration of cinema in 1995.
- 5. MacKenzie, John M. Propaganda and Empire, Manchester, 1975. p 3.
- 6. MacKenzie, John M., ibid. p. 33-34.
- 7. Cohn, Bernard S, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, New Delhi, 1997, p 4.
- 8. Cook, David A, A History of Narrative Film, Third Ed, New York, 1996.
- 9. Spurr, David, The Rhetoric of the Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration, Durham, N.C, 1994.
- 10. Chanan, Michael, The Dream That Kicks, London, 1980. P 273.
- 11. Mukhopadhyay, Kalish, Bangla Chalachchitra Shilper Itihas, 2nd Edition, Calcutta, 1972. Hiralal Sen, a Calcutta based film entrepreneur, made a six part series covering the King-Emperor's visit to India. The series covered the following: i. The arrival of the King and the Queen at Delhi, ii. The Delhi Durbar, iii. The arrival of the King and the Queen to Calcutta, iv. The ceremony held in honour of the King and the Queen and the royal declaration, v. Guard of honour at the Calcutta maidan, and vi. Departure of the King and Queen leaving Calcutta.
- 12. Bandyopadhyay, Samik, Calcutta Past and Present, Calcutta, 1990.

13. Delhi Durbar, 1911, L/ P&S/ 15/ 84, India Office Library of Records, London. 14. Cohn, Bernard S, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, New Delhi, 1997, p 129. 15. Foreign Department Proceedings for the Year 1912, Notes: Section I, Feb - 37 — 55. 16. Times, The, London, 2nd January; 1912. 17. Ibid. 18. Ibid. 19. Illustrated London News; London, 29th january; 1912. 20. Gaekwad, Fatesinghrao, Sayajirao of Baroda: The Prince and the Man, Popular Prakashan, Bombay; 1989, P-.238-239. 21. Ibid. P-241. 22. Cohn, Bernard S., op cit. p 129. 23. Ibid. p 116. 24. Tarlo, Emma, Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India, London, 1996, pp 66-67. 25. Cohn, Bernard S., op cit. p. 114. 26. The British Film Archive, London, has preserved two documentaries on the 1911 Delhi Durbar. The study of the film footage has not been incorporated in this article. 27. Copland, Ian, 'Sayaji Rao Gaekwad and "Sedition": The Dilemmas of an Indian Prince', in Rule,

Protest Identity, Ed. Peter Robb and David Taylor, London, 1978.

29. Foreign Department Proceedings for the Year 1912, Notes: Section I, Feb - 37-55.

28. Gaekwad, Fatesinghrao, op cit. R 187, 213-214.

- 30. Kobb, H. V to G/I Foreign Secretary, 10930, 11 Oct, 1911; as quoted in Copland, op cit.
- 31. Copland, Ian, op cit.
- 32. Gaekwad, Fatesingbrao, Sayajirao of Baroda: op cit P. 235-35.
- 33. Draft political despatch from G/I to Secretary of State, 20th November, 1911, as quoted in Copland, ibid.
- 34. Gaekwad, Fatesinghrao, Sayajirao of Baroda: op cit P-235-236.