



Government of India



AUGUST 1947

MEDIA REPORTAGE

They saw it, they reported it.



A traditional ceremony spurs media fascination

A unique event took place in New Delhi on August 14th, 1947. The transfer of power from British to Indian hands, sanctified and marked by the handover of the golden Sengol to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, by the high priest of the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, a sacred non-Brahmin religious order in existence for over five-hundred years in Tamil Nadu.

The media reporters were on hand to witness and report on the historic moment.



 **Hindustan Times**

The Hindustan Times reporting a day prior, on August 13th, wrote

“A gold scepter made of sixty sovereigns, it is learnt, will be presented to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at his residence by representatives of Sri Pandarasannadhi of Thiru-vaduthurai Adhinam (Tanjore, Madras Presidency) on the morning of August 15.”

The Statesman

The Statesman of August 15th, 1947 reported, *“Representatives of the Pandarasannadhi of Thiruvaduthurai Adhinam (Tanjore) presented Pandit Nehru with a golden sceptre at his residence on Thursday night. A large number of South Indians watched the ceremony.”*

TIME Magazine reporting
on the Transfer of Power
in the issue of
August 25th, 1947.



FOREIGN NEWS

INDIA

"Oh Lovely Dawn"

As the great day approached, Indians thanked their varied gods and rejoiced with special prayers, poems and songs. Poetess Sarojini Naidu set the theme in a radio message: "Oh lovely dawn of freedom that breaks in gold and purple over the ancient capital . . .!"

Blessing with Ashes. Even such an agnostic as Jawaharlal Nehru, on the eve of becoming India's first Prime Minister, fell into the religious spirit. From Tanjore in south India came two emissaries of Sri Amblavana Desigar, head of a sannyasi order of Hindu ascetics. Sri Amblavana thought that Nehru, as first Indian head of a really Indian Government ought, like ancient Hindu kings, to receive the

Then they entered the house in dignity, fanned by two boys with special fans of deer hair. One sannyasi carried a scepter of gold, five feet long, two inches thick. He sprinkled Nehru with holy water from Tanjore and drew a streak in sacred ash across Nehru's forehead. Then he wrapped Nehru in the *pithambaram* and handed him the golden scepter. He also gave Nehru some cooked rice which had been offered that very morning to the dancing god Nataraja in south India, then flown by plane to Delhi.

Later that evening Nehru, and other men who would be India's new rulers on the morrow, went to the home of Rajendra Prasad, president of the Constituent Assembly. On his back lawn four plantain trees served as pillars for a temporary miniature temple. A roof of fresh green

the chamber. Members of the Constituent Assembly rose. Together they pledged themselves "at this solemn moment . . . to the service of India and her people. . . ." Nehru and Prasad struggled through the thousands of rejoicing Indians who had gathered outside to the Viceroy's House (now called the Governor General's House) where Viscount Mountbatten, who that day learned he would become an earl, awaited them. There, 32 minutes after Mountbatten had ceased to be a Viceroy,* Nehru and Prasad rather timidly, almost bashfully, told Mountbatten that India's Constituent Assembly had assumed power and would like him to be Governor General.

The People's Day. Delhi's thousands rejoiced. The town was gay, with orange, white and green. Bullocks' horns and horses' legs were painted in the new national colors, and silk merchants sold tricolor saris. Triumphant light blazed everywhere. Even in the humble Bhangi (Untouchable) quarters, candles and oil lamps flickered brightly in houses that had never before seen artificial light. The government wanted no one to be unhappy on India's Independence Day. Political prisoners, including Communists, were freed. All death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. The Government, closing all slaughterhouses, ordered that no animals be killed.

The people made it their day. After dawn half a million thronged the green expanse of the Grand Vista and parkways near the Government buildings of New Delhi. Wherever Lord and Lady Mountbatten went that day, their open carriage, drawn by six bay horses, was beset by happy, cheering Indians who swept aside police lines. A Briton received a popular ovation rarely given even to an Indian leader. "*Mountbattenji ki jai* [Victory to Mountbatten]," they roared, adding the affectionate and respectful suffix "*ji*" usually reserved for popular Indian leaders.

Now & then Nehru (who sometimes shows the instincts of a traffic policeman) harangued the crowd to be more orderly. Once he espied a European girl caught up in the swirl. She was Pamela Mountbatten, the Governor General's 18-year-old daughter. Nehru literally slugged his way through the crowd to rescue her, brought her to the platform.

In the Council House the Constituent Assembly heard Mountbatten take the oath as Governor General.† "Regard me

* In London, the King-Emperor became plain George VI, King of Pakistan and of India (just as he is King of Canada and other dominions beyond the seas). Workmen took down the bronze plate in Whitehall, reading "India Office," replaced it with a painted wooden sign reading "Commonwealth Relations Office."

† Another colonial power, France, announced that the 203 square miles on India's east coast which she still rules will be organized as the five free cities of Pondichéry, Karikal, Chandernagore, Mahé and Yanam, with locally elected governments, within the French union.



David D. Duncan—Life

NEHRU & MOUNTBATTENJI
In Delhi, bullocks' horns and horses' legs.

symbol of power and authority from Hindu holy men.

With the emissaries came south India's most famous player of the *nagasaram*, a special kind of Indian flute. Like other sannyasis, who abstain from hair-cutting and hair-combing, the two emissaries wore their long hair properly matted and wound round their heads. Their naked chests and foreheads were streaked with sacred ash, blessed by Sri Amblavana. In an ancient Ford, the evening of Aug. 14, they began their slow, solemn progress to Nehru's house. Ahead walked the flutist, stopping every 100 yards or so to sit on the road and play his flute for about 15 minutes. Another escort bore a large silver platter. On it was the *pithambaram* (cloth of God), a costly fabric with patterns of golden thread.

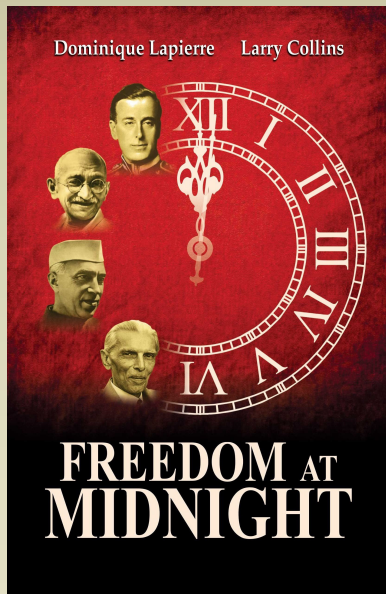
When at last they reached Nehru's house, the flutist played while the sannyasi awaited an invitation from Nehru.

leaves sheltered a holy fire attended by a Brahman priest. There, while several thousand women chanted hymns, the ministers-to-be and constitution-makers passed in front of the priest, who sprinkled holy water on them. The oldest woman placed dots of red powder (for luck) on each man's forehead.

Tryst with Destiny. Thus dedicated, India's rulers turned to the secular business of the evening. At 11 o'clock they gathered in the Constituent Assembly Hall, ablaze with the colors of India's new tricolor flag—orange, white and green. Nehru made an inspired speech: "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge. . . . At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

And as the twelfth chime of midnight died out, a conch shell, traditional herald of the dawn, sounded raucously through

Notes by historians and writers



**Dominique Lapierre
&
Larry Collins**
in
***Freedom at Midnight,
1975.***

The authors describe
the event in their
landmark book on
India's freedom struggle.

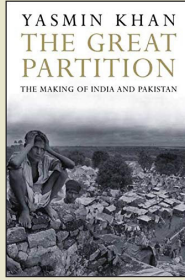
“The two holy men in the car
stared straight ahead with
celestial indifference. They
were sannyasin... pilgrims from
an ancient, timeless India.

One of the two bore a massive
silver platter upon which was
folded a swathe of white silk
streaked in gold, the
Pitambaram, the Cloth of God.

The other carried a five-foot
sceptre, a flask of holy water
from the Tanjore River, a pouch
of sacred ash and a pouch of
boiled rice which had been
offered at dawn at the feet of
Nataraja, the Dancing God.

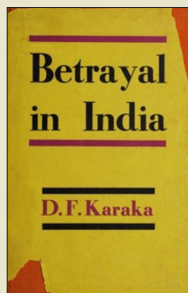
Their procession came to a stop
in front of a simple bungalow at
17, York Road. As once Hindu
holy men had conferred upon
ancient India's kings their symbols
of power, so the sannyasin had
come to bestow their emblems
of authority on the man about to
assume the leadership of a
modern Indian nation.

Jawaharlal Nehru submitted to it
with almost cheerful humility. It
was as if that proud rationalist
had instinctively understood that
in the awesome tasks awaiting
him no possible source of aid
was to be totally ignored.”



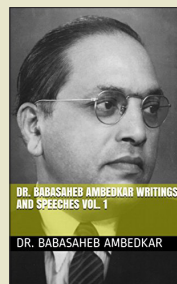
Yasmin Khan
in
***The Great Partition:
The Making of India and
Pakistan, 2017.***

“ In New Delhi, at a private residence, Nehru and his ministerial colleagues sat cross-legged around a holy fire as Hindu priests from Tanjore chanted hymns and sprinkled holy water on them.”



D. F. Karaka
in
***Betrayal in
India,
1950.***

“ It was traditional in ancient India to derive power and authority from the holy men. Pandit Nehru yielded to all this religious ceremony because it was said of old of the kings of India, that this was the traditional way of assuming power.”



Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar,
***Writings and
Speeches,
1979.***

“ Did not Prime Minister Nehru, on the 15th of August 1947 sit at the yajna to celebrate the event of becoming the first Prime Minister... And wear the Raja Danda?”

Civilizational continuity

The Kings of the imperial Chola Dynasty assumed power by accepting the Sengol, from the head priest.

As he accepted the Sengol from Sri La Sri Kumaraswamy Thambiran of the Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru accepted the transfer of power from the British to independent India through a uniquely Indian symbol, that united the south and the north of India.



