

## SPOTLIGHT

By NAVEJ SARMA  
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# THE MAN WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN KING

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spokespersons for the external affairs

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researched... A review by Anjana Basu

**M**HAJAJAH Duleep Singh is

one of those great men who had long unworldly at the moment. The son of the great one-eyed King of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, he is best known for having spent his life wandering around the coast of Queen Victoria as one of her favourite darlings. Mahajajah, due to mention a lasting memory of the power of the British Empire, where most of the known world was coloured a bright red. Think on and you may remember that Duleep Singh went on to die in Paris. As to the rest the details of his life have usually seemed irrelevant barring for the fact that he seems to have illustrated the Queen Empress' strategy to some extent since he was given an estate barely larger than a Lahore neighbourhood and allowed to throw parties and drink and gamble.

Navej Sarma's book delves into the life of this intriguing personality, covering last and fiction in an attempt to throw light on an event that crushed the power of the Sikhs under the British heel just before the war of 1857. Described India's hopes of independence for the next ninety years. While the facts are interesting enough, the book gives less than the freedom to delve into the psy-

chological aspects of the episode.

Duleep Singh's kingdom passed from king to king before finally reaching him as an eight-year-old under his beautiful mother's care. However, Ranjit Singh did not have the political skill to save her a place for herself or her son and Duleep's brief rule ended with the child being snatched from his mother and converted to Christianity before being taken across the Kala Pal. At Aishan he became a country squire in England but as the years passed Duleep began to realise that he had actually been given nothing at all and resorted to Sikhism, while rebellion against the



British began to rise in his heart. History denounced him as a womaniser, dramatist and warier, but Sarma makes out an effective case for compassion and understanding. In essence it is a tale of betrayal following betrayal until the last

the results in Duleep Singh's death in a cheap hotel room in Paris, far from the marble and gilded splendours of Lahore into which he was born. Duleep Singh, however, was in no way a hero of any kind. At his prime, Ebleben, he was famous for organising shooting parties where rabbits, partridges, snipe and hares were mown down - though in this he was merely following in the footsteps of the British aristocrats of the time, or perhaps in those of the tiger shooting, Mahajajah in India. Even the woman he married were chosen out of frustration at his own powerlessness - the illegitimate half Abyssinian daughter of a German found in Cairo and a chamber maid who gave him two daughters.

Duleep lived well beyond his means and was always in debt but, as the said Queen Victoria pardoned him, paid off his debts and allowed him to be buried on his estate in England.

There are numerous descriptions of life in the harems of Lahore that are fascinating and rich. Sarma's grasp of language is assured and his feeling for the cause strong. As one of India's most visible spokespersons for the external affairs ministry he puts Duleep Singh's cause forward compellingly and his work is undoubtedly soundly researched.

One could however have asked for more length in the work - occasionally there is a feeling of being snatched through episodes and the descriptions lessen. Great events are compressed to two paragraphs and Duleep's Singh's relationships with the women in his life, especially the coming of Ada, are hurried through. Ebleben shifts in Paris to Moscow in a frantic rush as Duleep tries to atone for his mistakes and regain the world that was snatched from him. In the end Queen Victoria paid his debts and allowed him to be buried on his estate, but by then it was far too late. *(The reviewer is a freelance contributor)*