

Tailing the king's tale

CHAT A childhood fascination for the story of Duleep Singh led to "The Exile", author Navtej Sarna tells SANGEETA

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Does it matter where one dies, in which country, which land? If you have not lived at home, perhaps there is an issue to be done

The sprawling lines of diplomat-author Navtej Sarna's latest book, "The Exile" can serve two purposes. One, as aimed by the author as a book that holds a poignant narrative all set to blossom with the turning page. Two, as an epitaph that could have been on the tombstone of its protagonist, personally signed.

Alas, Sarna's protagonist, Duleep Singh, the last Maharaja of Punjab, died "in a cheap Paris hotel" way back in 1893.

Intriguing story

History doesn't see this exiled king as extraordinary, but his life story certainly was. Rather, the story certainly was. Rather, the story certainly was. Rather, the story certainly was. Rather, the story certainly was.

Duleep Singh's story goes thus: After the death of his two stepmothers, he was enthroned at age five. The British not only annexed his kingdom soon but took him under their guardianship, away from his father and his people. Converted to Christianity, he was transported in England to live the life of a country squire in Epsom, at age 16. The realisation of his lost legacy turned him into a rebel. He became a Sikh again, tried returning home but got dragged into

the murky politics of 19th Century Europe. After a lonely death in a Paris hotel, he was buried in Epsom not with Sikh but Christian rites. Sarna fills in, "Though he married twice, had eight children, none of his children had any child in that sense, the line of Ranjit Singh ended."

Talking about the tool behind the book, Sarna says, "I sat on

my desk for nearly nine years. For it, I dug into history books written in India and abroad, in English and Punjabi." The Indian Foreign Service officer says his diplomatic posting in Washington helped him to access the Library of Congress which had old books about that period in history. "Also, at the National Archives in New Delhi, I could

lay my hands on the files that had details about his early life, say his days in Fatehgarh and Mussoorie. Most of these files have remained unused."

Fascinated by the story of the Maharaja, about whom he had first heard from his mother nearly 40 years ago, Sarna says he "wanted to bring out the emotions, the passion, the tragedy of

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his story." He adds, "It is supposed to be a novel and I try getting inside the mind of this historical person." Duleep Singh has found space in history "from the English point of view" and Sarna, in this Penguin India publication, attempts to tell his story "from the Indian point of view." And to achieve it, this former External Affairs Ministry spokesman, now all set to go to Geneva as India's ambassador - says he "had to steal time" from his full time job. "When you want to do justice to your day job you end up writing on flights, during train journeys, on weekends." There was a time when he used to do photography too during free time. "I love clicking human faces and landscapes with my old Nikon SLR, but the digital age has stolen the joy of clicking pictures."

While his interest in photography grew out of travelling, his love for writing steamed from growing up in a household "where books were considered important." His father M.S. Sarna was a respected name in Punjabi literature and another Jagjit Singh, a reputed translator, but Sarna underlines, "That can give you a certain atmosphere, but to become a writer, it's not essential."

His writing stint began in the late '70s with newspaper articles and has written quite a few short stories too. His debut novel, "We Were Not Lovers Like That" was published in 2003. What would follow "The Exile" is yet to be decided. "Right now, I am trying to settle down with the thought that 'The Exile' is finally out."



HISTORY'S DISCIPLE Navtej Sarna in New Delhi **PHOTO: V. MOORTHY**

literature