

A prince in trouble

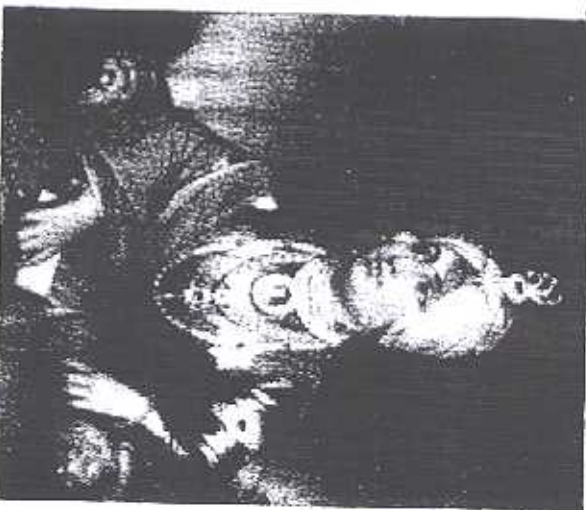
Tragedies have a way of living on. And few have matched those faced by Duldeep Singh, son of the 'Iron King' of Punjab, Ranjit Singh, who was made to sign away his kingdom to the British before he was 10 years old. In an effort to make this 'perfect Indian prince' loyal to the British court, he was separated from his mother and family, taken away to England, brought up as a member of the English nobility. Navtej Sarma provides layers to his sorry life in his novel. The Exile by filling in spaces not recorded by history. Suman Tandon listened to him as the author explained why he chose this tragic prince who became a favourite of Queen Victoria, later turned away from the British Empire. But the prince never could return to Punjab either despite living on in people's memories, instead dying alone in a Paris hotel.

How easy was it to write a novel on a historical character? What about the usual charges of distortion etc that are levelled?

I set out clear guidelines for myself when I started by avoiding any distortion of history. The facts in the book are all common knowledge. I have only added the human element to these facts. What I have put is the sense of loss, regret, bitterness, anger — and even these are not purely out of my mind. There was a fair amount of material available — correspondence, private letters, memoirs of Lady Logan, under whose husband's charge Duldeep was in England. The main characters already have enough known about them, but it was characters like Mangia or Arur who have been amplified.

Why did you choose Duldeep and not his father Ranjit Singh as your subject?

A lot has already been written on Ranjit Singh. For my novel, I was looking for colour. Here's a character who is weak, has foibles, and is fractured by events. For me as a novelist, that was far more tempting. My only concern was not to anger historians. I had to decide how far back to go back in telling this story. Going



For left: A portrait of Duldeep Singh; left, Navtej Sarma. The image on the cover of the book was clicked by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Both were close to the prince

send a letter to her, and there is evidence that it did reach her. It is only after the mutiny that the thinking changed, and he was allowed to meet her, for which he travelled to Calcutta.

In her last few years, she instills a sense of legacy for all he has lost, all he should inherit as part of his private property, which has nothing to do with the treaty that he had been made to sign as a child when he was made to give away state property. It is this sense of loss that starts his correspondence for private properties, which remained his lifelong struggle.

What about the weakness and fragility that are so apparent in the ruling cliques of the time? It is all accepted history. We know of the deceptions and treachery that took place.

How long did you take on research and writing? Did you rely on oral history as well?

About nine years totally. But I did do two books in between. I read everything that was there on him. Oral history was important and I tried to capture the huge form of oral traditions. I had been hearing elementary stuff from my childhood.

You have the first person in the voice of various characters. Was it easy to get under so many skins? Each book must find its own framework. This was the way I thought of doing this book.



THE EXILE: A NOVEL ON THE LIFE OF DULDEEP SINGH, Navtej Sarma
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was separated from her son for 14 years. Duldeep did

back 10 years was needed, for without this the events of the book would not have made sense. The challenge was to avoid doing it as history.

You give far more space to his mother, Jind Kaur?

She is closer to him. She is with him for the first decade of his life, before he is taken away by the British. And, therefore in the novel too, she is more of character for that period. She