

# Maharaja and I <sup>124</sup>/<sub>30</sub>



PABLOVA MILICHEVIC

DULEEP SINGH, the last maharaja of Punjab, comes alive, along with a host of other forgotten people in Navtej Sarna's new novel *The Exile* (Penguin, Rs 450). On the eve of its launch, Sarna says that he first heard of the maharaja from his mother, nearly 40 years ago. But it wasn't till 2000 that he started reading extensively about the history of the British Annexation of the Punjab.

"Here is a man whose life

was such a calculated exercise by the British — a childhood beginning with the loss of his kingdom, his realisation of the treatment meted out to him by the British who had promised to take care of him and his urgent need to return to his land and his people. I wanted to tell the story of this man and the Sikh people, to give voice to characters who've been nothing but a footnote in history books," says Sarna, who believes that

there is no objective truth, as history is usually written by those in power to suppress the truth of those who aren't.

The challenge, Sarna says, was in striking a balance between facts and the human dimensions that he wanted to portray in the novel. "When I began writing in 2003, I knew that a third-person narrative would not work, neither would a non-fictional genre. A novel seemed to be the best way to tell this story," says Sarna. It is told in Duleep Singh's voice and that of four others in such a way that each personal tale adds to the story of Duleep Singh and the history of Punjab. It also contains an unsparing examination of British imperialism as well as the greed of the Indian princes that fed it. "The story, in essence, is about loss, about being separated from something that is rightfully yours. The exile is not only from geographical locations, it is about the exile within oneself," says Sarna.

— Anushree Majumdar