

Tracing the life of a neglected maharaja

Navtej Sarna
sheds light on
mystery that is
Duleep Singh

By Arnab Banerjee
in New Delhi

HE HAS been the face of the Ministry of External Affairs for over five years, but Navtej Sarna, joint secretary (external publicity) and India's ambassador-designate to Israel, is also a writer in his spare time.

"I don't allow my being a diplomat to come in the way of my writing, even if it's got

Navtej Sarna's book is called *The Exile*

to do with history," Sarna said at the launch of his second book, *The Exile*, based on the life of Maharaja Duleep Singh. It is a tragic story of a deposed ruler living in exile. Even his maiden book, a novel titled *We Weren't Lovers Like That*, had a ring of melancholy in it.

"It's just a coincidence that both my books are somewhat filled with sadness. But the fact that Duleep Singh lived and died in anonymity, although his father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, stayed a victor, has a lot of pathos that drew me to him," explained Sarna, who has raised the sensitive issue of the Koh-i-Noor — which had been taken by the East India Company from



Ambassador-designate to Israel Navtej Sarna reads from *The Exile* at the book's launch on Saturday.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh — being returned to India.

With history and historical facts often getting misconstrued or distorted in transmission from one generation to another, does he not fear that history often gets unreal? "My book is not a historical biography," the writer said. "I don't know much about history, I'm not a historian." He admitted that he used "his imagination to add colour to the novel, but within the parameters of the probable and changed his storytelling into a more emotive expression."

A deeply moving and gripping story, *The Exile* traces the "emotional and spiritual exile, rather than the mere geographical exile, of the maharaja," Sarna, a Delhiite, said he'd grown up listening

to stories about the maharaja whenever his family would gather together after dinner.

Told in the voices of four characters who were Duleep Singh's contemporaries, the book talks of the tragic figure who was separated from his mother and his

'Duleep Singh's story had a lot of pathos'

people, taken under British guardianship, and converted to Christianity, before he reconvered back to Sikhism. The story ends in the exile's untimely end in a cheap hotel room in Paris.

Sarna said he impersonated the character he thoroughly

researched while roaming the streets of Lahore, where Duleep Singh lived. He said the maharaja didn't get just treatment, "even in the treaties he signed with the British."

Sarna may have been passionately following his subject's background, but not many among the audience seemed intrigued by the maharaja, or remotely passionate about him, for the book's launch was followed merely by two questions, one of them from a school friend who said the book was just right for an Asmita Khan film and had the potential of bringing India its first Oscar.

A nice thought but no one really cared. The bar had opened by then.

arnab.banerjee@mailindia.in