

nale that such a deal with the United States would bring American influence over India's foreign policy, a closeness that would be akin to 'dining with Satan'. In West Bengal, on the other hand, the left government invites 'any investment, be it Tata, Birla or American investment... as long as they generate jobs and benefit the state'.

Even as India's major left party has moved to the centre at least in state policies, the space at the far-left is

being filled by more radical strains of communism. One in particular runs a deep shade of red, coloured with blood and violence. Since 1967 a grassroots Naxalite armed movement that proclaimed itself disillusioned by India's ruling government as well as by the 'ideological sclerosis' of the old left has gained ground in central India.

★★★

Somewhat closer to the margins of India's left movement are the 'new

left' leaders such as Medha Patkar and Aruna Roy, whose beliefs overlap somewhat with the global Green Left movement. These leaders have condemned the rise of 'global imperialism' in India—they regard multinational corporations as corrosive—and instead stress the need for community institutions and rule from the grassroots. The new left in India are, however, not linked to a large, popular base, and they have limited themselves to civil activism. ■

## Historically fit



### THE EXILE

By Navtej Sarna

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By R. Prasannan

**E**mpires do not end in sudden deaths. They decline for excruciatingly prolonged periods, through several Talikotas and Waterloos. When they finally fall, there is hardly a tremor, let alone a quake. The long period of decay would have prepared history, and its witnesses, for the final end.

Not so in the case of the Sikh empire. It had a dramatic rise and an incredibly rapid fall—all in one man's life span. Not even his entire life span, but just his adulthood. The Sikh empire, with which the mighty British 'treated' at par, rose and died with Ranjit Singh, not having lasted enough years and lives to bequeath even a dynasty.

Ranjit's empire stands in history as an exclamation mark without a sentence preceding it. Somewhat like a King Arthur legend—with no predecessor or successor in its Camelot of Lahore. And with his own Holy Grail of a Kohinoor.

A 'smaller' writer (or for that matter, even a greater Walter Scott) writing on the great Ranjit's son, Duleep, would have been tempted to 'invent' a wronged dynasty, and mythify a wronged successor. But diplomat-writer Navtej Sarna is too much of a realist to do that. He has written a novel that is as true to history as can be, without shearing off the embellishments of fiction.

Perhaps there was no need to be untrue to history. The events that unfolded in the wake of Ranjit's death were too dramatic to be believed to be true. The plots, the palace intrigues, the shifting loyalties of kin, the backstabbing, the fear and the terror were as much part of recorded history as they darkly embellish the chapters of this book.

Duleep's story—from his Camelot cradle to his deathbed in a cheap Paris hotel—is told through the accounts of various people. The beauty of this approach is that the reader occasionally gets different views of the same event, but then the author takes care not to try this technique too often, which could tire out an impatient reader.

At the same time, the chapters do not read like a British account and native account of the same event. That is exactly where Sarna parts ways with the historian. Historians, both contemporary chroniclers and latter-day scholars, have been following the rise and fall of the Sikh empire, the bloody Anglo-Sikh wars,

the final annexation, and then moving on to how the British 'controlled' and defeated a lawless Punjab. On the other hand, Sarna has followed not the history of Punjab, but the story of its disinherited ruler.

In that attempt, Sarna also assumes that his reader is already familiar, at least vaguely, with the history that he is not telling—of Gujerat and Chillianwala, of Hardinge and Dalhousie, of Gulab Singh and Dhian Singh, of Henry Lawrence and John Lawrence. Even Punjabi terms like *dera*, *misl*, *angithi* and *jarnail* have been left unexplained, leaving it a little difficult for the reader to negotiate through the grand chaos that befell Punjab in the mid-19th century.

Throughout the book, there is that strong Indian yearning for the Kohinoor. It is there constantly in Duleep's mind, rarely expressed, but always suggested. At the end of the book one would wonder: is the author reflecting a Punjabi's or an Indian's longing for the lost diamond through the Duleep's constant yearning? The yearning for the Grail!

Admittedly, there is beauty in such a conception, but this reviewer would strongly disagree with such a sentiment. The Kohinoor, as its own story amply demonstrates, is no one's by birthright. Such stones, as Humayun famously said, are gifted in honour or won in battles. Neither option has been available to Duleep or any other Indian.