

Queen Victoria and the Maharaja Duleep Singh: Conflicting Identities in an Imperial Context

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An argument that starts from the sovereign claims of the son of the “Lion of Punjab,” ends, somewhat ridiculously, though not without a touch of pathos, with the sorrows of the Squire of Elveden.¹

Thus did an anonymous *Times* editorial of August 31, 1882, dismiss the Maharaja Duleep Singh’s claim to his family estates by summarizing the metamorphosis of his social and cultural identity. To this day Punjab’s last maharaja remains an enigmatic and problematic figure. Few would dispute that there is a “touch of pathos” to his life, but there remains no agreement on precisely where he fit in the British empire’s social structure. One of the problems with any analysis of Duleep is that he underwent so many metamorphoses. First, in the 1840s he was the young maharaja, who served alternately as the political pawn of the Sikh army, his mother, and the British East India Company. Then, in the 1850s he became the exotic, partially-Westernized Indian prince who stayed frequently as the guest of Queen Victoria while acquiring the habits of an English country gentleman. For the next thirty years, he resided in Britain, entertaining its aristocracy and immersing himself fully in that society. But this life finally broke down in the 1880s amid recrimination against British authorities over the loss of his inheritance. He then resumed his Sikh identity and became a rebel against the British Empire. Finally, in the early 1890s as an ailing man facing death, he sought and received a royal pardon and tried to regain the standing that he had lost with his British friends.

Such a chameleon can appear in any hue that writers wish to give him. For late Victorians, whether the maharaja’s critics or friends, Duleep had adopted many of the attributes of an English gentleman. Depending on their perspective, either his lust for wealth led him into a self-centered rebellion against his adopted land, or the obstinacy of British bureaucrats and the temptations of Sikh agitators led him temporarily astray. In the eyes of many twentieth-century Indians, depending on their attitude toward the relationship of the Sikh community to the rest of the subcontinent, he was

either a hero of the early independence movement or a champion of Sikh nationalism. All these characterizations of Duleep Singh draw on one or two phases of his life, but never all of them. The problem with both the financial and nationalist explanations of Duleep's motives is that neither fits the cultural setting in which Duleep lived. The former results from a late-Victorian, upper-middle-class British contempt for the stereotypical dilettante "Eastern prince" who often visited the center of imperial power. The latter represents an Indian or Sikh national consciousness that the maharaja appears only dimly to have appreciated. While both account in part for Duleep's behavior, neither is sufficient alone or in combination with the other. The complexity of the maharaja's cultural and political odyssey may lead one to conclude that he did, indeed, go through several different and mutually exclusive senses of his own ethnic identity. It is understandable, therefore, that Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand, who wrote the most scholarly biography of Duleep to date, did not attempt to find a unifying theme to his behavior.²

Nevertheless, Duleep's life did exhibit such unity. The reason that it is not apparent is that his loyalties to and identification with a larger group bore little relation to those that are common today, or that were coming to dominate the political and cultural life of late-nineteenth century Britain and India. Duleep consistently clung to his identity as the maharaja of Punjab, but for him this title had little to do with Indian or Sikh nationalism. Nor did it preclude him from considering himself a subject of Queen Victoria. For Duleep's concept of allegiance was neither ethnic nor national. Rather it was dynastic, and it thrived on the personal ties that were possible in an empire that retained the concept of subjecthood to the monarch rather than citizenship of the state. In this sense Duleep had much in common with Victoria, who also regarded many aspects of the British Empire in terms of personal rule and encouraged the maharaja to do the same. Duleep Singh's rebellion was, therefore, not so much a matter of either nationalism or selfish petulance as it was of dynastic honor.

When the *Times* published its editorial dismissing the maharaja's claims to his inheritance, thirty-six years of encounters with British authority had apparently transformed the heir to the kingdom of the Sikh conqueror, Ranjit Singh, into an English country gentleman, who mingled with the highest echelons of British society. The editorial was a response to Duleep's own letter, published in the same edition of the *Times*. Claiming that the East India Company's 1849 annexation of Punjab violated earlier treaties and punished him for a rebellion in which he took no part, the maharaja proclaimed: "I have been most unjustly deprived of my kingdom," and "I

am still the lawful Sovereign of the Punjaub [*sic*]." But rather than claim the right to rule his former kingdom, he conceded: "I am quite content to be the subject of my Most Gracious Sovereign." Instead of restoration to his throne, the purpose of his public letter was to seek the fortune that he had lost as a child, when the East India Company had confiscated his personal estates along with his kingdom. The former, he argued, would have returned to him revenues of roughly £130,000 per annum. Rather than allow him to draw on his family fortune, the East India Company had made the maharaja its total dependent promising him an allowance of at least £40,000 a year once he reached adulthood. When the time came to make good on this promise, however, the East India Company unilaterally reduced its obligation to £25,000 per annum. The Company and its successor, the India Office, provided loans against this allowance to rent several estates, usually castles with excellent hunting grounds, around England and Scotland. In 1863 the India Office gave him a loan of £110,000 to purchase Elveden Hall in Suffolk. It withheld the payment for these loans from his allowance, however, thus reducing his stipend to roughly £13,000 per annum. To this amount Parliament mandated an increase of £2,000 in 1880. Although the resulting sum of £15,000 was considerably more than the annual income of the average British peer, it fell far short of the inheritance to which the maharaja considered himself entitled.³

Duleep's willingness to accept a financial solution to the loss of his sovereignty appeared to undermine his argument. For the maharaja had hardly suffered at the hands of British authorities since the loss of his kingdom. In 1854 at the age of fifteen, he migrated to England and befriended Queen Victoria. At his residences, he frequently entertained friends from the highest levels of British society. Among them was the Prince of Wales. It should therefore come as no surprise that *The London Times* editorial portrayed Duleep as a spoiled aristocrat who was raising tenuous and potentially dangerous political issues solely in an attempt to force the British government into supporting his excessively lavish standard of living.

His argument concerning his *de jure* sovereignty of the Punjab is manifestly only intended to support his pecuniary claims. If this were settled to his satisfaction, he would doubtless be content, and more than content, to die, as he lived, an English country gentleman, with estates swarming with game, and with an income sufficient to his needs.⁴

The problem with this argument is that, within four years of the publication of his letter, Duleep Singh tried to organize a rebellion against the

British Raj. He contacted Sikh nationalists, proclaimed the restoration of his kingdom, and traveled to St. Petersburg seeking military and financial assistance for the creation of a Sikh army. In doing so he alienated the very social circle that formed the basis of his life in Britain and exiled himself from the country where his family now lived—a high price indeed to pay for gaining the ability to live a life of luxury that required more than the then lordly income of £15,000 per annum could provide.

Many have disagreed with this analysis of the maharaja's grievance. Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in him, particularly among Sikhs, many of whom regard him as one of their national heroes. For example, one book, published in 1998, describes him in its title as "fighter for freedom."⁵ In their attempt to highlight Duleep's role as a national hero, such historians, whether amateur or professional, challenge assertions of his transformation from a Sikh maharaja into an English gentleman. The Maharaja Duleep Singh Centenary Society, a Sikh-British organization, created in 1993 on the hundredth anniversary of Duleep's death, summarizes the reasons for his abortive attempt to throw off Britain's rule over Punjab in the following terms:

Despite his English education, Christian conversion, royal treatment, luxurious life style amid European glamour, the rebellious Sikh spirit, that had tasted sovereignty, was hibernating in some remote recess of the sub-conscious mind of Maharajah Duleep Singh who on gaining self-awareness underwent a metamorphosis that turned him into a rebel.⁶

More recently this organization dedicated a statue to him near Elveden Hall. It depicts the maharaja atop a horse holding a sword, a pose which he almost certainly never adopted in real life.⁷ It is true that in his correspondence with Sikh nationalists in the 1880s Duleep styled himself "the Lawful Sovereign of the Sikh Nation."⁸ Yet as the Centenary Society's description of him suggests, his role as a Sikh hero is problematic because of his earlier persona as an English gentleman.

Since from the age of fifteen onward Duleep did not reside in India, and since he had no connection with the community of Indian intellectuals living in England, he acquired little if any sense of the national consciousness that was spreading across the subcontinent in the wake of British conquest. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that his aristocratic friends displayed enough British nationalism for it to serve as a model for him. During this period, his only significant Sikh contact was his mother, Jindan Kour, who

spent the last two years of her life, 1861-1863, in Britain with him. It was she who first informed him of a prophesy about a ruler who would return from exile to liberate the Sikh people. But there is little indication that he took this information seriously at the time, if for no other reason than he was a voluntary convert to Christianity and a close friend of many members of Britain's social elite.

What Duleep was conscious of, however, was his status as the maharaja of Punjab, a title which the British annexation of his homeland had considerably diminished. His situation differed from traditional practice in India, where the tributary systems of the Mughal and Mahratta empires had allowed kings to rule their domains while acknowledging their subjection to an imperial dynast.⁹ It differed also from that of many other Indian monarchs who had recognized the "paramountcy" of the East India Company while retaining significant levels of control over local affairs. Duleep's misfortune was to have been titular ruler of Punjab during the governor-generalship of Lord Dalhousie, whose preference for direct annexation of Indian kingdoms was notorious and later became a major underlying reason for the Rebellion of 1857-1858. The Rebellion caused the British government to replace the Company's rule in India with that of its own, newly created India Office and to refrain from further direct annexations of Indian kingdoms. But for Duleep it was too late. He had lost his kingdom and the India Office showed no interest in restoring it. In marked contrast to Dalhousie's policy the Crown Raj extolled India's princes in an attempt to secure them as allies against any future rebellion.

Long before she became empress, however, Queen Victoria herself honored Duleep publicly in England. She and the prime minister, Lord Aberdeen, soon agreed that it would be most appropriate if "we accordingly treated him *just as we do all Princes*."¹⁰ Although this category did not include the royal princes, it placed the maharaja on a par with the lesser princes of the German states. At public occasions British officials accorded him precedence over ambassadors and British aristocrats, and sometimes had to respond to the racial outrage of German princes and their staffs. Given such recognition it is not surprising that London's exclusive Carlton Club made him a member, a level of social acceptance for a person of color in white society that would have been unthinkable in India or the white-settler colonies.

In this social and political context Duleep acquired a dual identity, which was only possible under a pre-modern system of loyalty. As maha-

raja, he continued to regard himself as “the lawful sovereign of the Punjab.” But he also recognized that the East India Company’s victory in 1846 over Sikh forces of which he was the titular ruler had limited this sovereignty. He therefore regarded himself as a king who owed allegiance to the British monarch. In this sense he also considered himself a British subject, a term which he used frequently.

Queen Victoria encouraged this dynastic view of Duleep’s British identity because she believed it applied to all her subjects. Even before the Rebellion of 1857-1858, which officially transferred East India Company possessions to the Crown, she wrote in her journal of “having had to despoil him [Duleep] of his Kingdom,”¹¹ as if she herself had committed this act rather than a company that hardly considered her personal wishes at all. After the rebellion with the introduction of monarchical phrases such as “Crown Raj” and “viceroy,” to describe the trappings of British rule, Victoria insisted that she play a role in the government of India. She stated as much to her prime minister, Lord Palmerston, during the Sepoy Rebellion: “As long as the Government [of India] was that of the Company, the Sovereign was generally left quite ignorant of decisions and despatches; now that the Government is to be that of the Sovereign, and the direction will, she presumes, be given in her name, a direct official responsibility to her will have to be established.”¹² More privately her journal entries indicate a personal desire to have titular sovereignty over the subcontinent, “that India shd [*sic*] belong to *me*.”¹³

Her dynastic approach to the British subjecthood of Indians complemented her class-based disdain toward institutions of state that attempted to interfere with a direct relationship between her and her subjects. Such sentiment surfaced a generation later when Victoria complained that the Indian government should attempt to hire “people of higher calibre socially.”¹⁴ From the earliest days of her friendship with Duleep, she regarded such bureaucrats as beneath the maharaja socially and not worthy of controlling his financial affairs. In a letter to Lord Dalhousie, written in 1854, Victoria complained:

There is something too painful in the idea of a young deposed sovereign, once so powerful, receiving a pension, and having no security that his children and descendants, and these moreover Christians, should have any home or position.¹⁵

As a friend of the royal family, Duleep must have picked up on Victoria’s annoyance with “her” ministers and civil servants and the elitist

tone that often accompanied it. It helps to explain why, even when he had rejected his British allegiance and was attempting to organize a rebellion against the British Raj, he distinguished his animosity to the government from his personal regard for Queen Victoria in a letter he wrote to her:

For Your Majesty's Government having branded me disloyal when God knows I was most loyal and devoted to Your Majesty I had no other course open to me except either to turn traitor or continue to submit to the insults repeatedly offered to me by the Administration of India.¹⁶

It is worth noting, however, that as vaunted as Duleep's position in British society was, it did not match the level he might have expected in an India free of British rule. Indians, of course, would have no more considered the maharaja of Punjab to be a lesser prince than would Europeans, the king of Sweden. Both lands were once powerful regional kingdoms whose influence had waned. Duleep's father had ruled one of the most formidable powers in South Asia, and it is likely that the young maharaja considered himself every bit as royal as the children of Queen Victoria. The difference lay in the fact that Victoria's forces had defeated his own on the battlefield, not *vice versa*. In his later correspondence with Sikh nationalists, they addressed him as "Your Majesty."¹⁷

Duleep was soon to learn that, in spite of his acceptance by Britain's elite, there were two ways in which he did not even enjoy the privileges of a lesser British noble. One limitation was racial. For although Britain had no laws against miscegenation, the maharaja found it impossible to find a bride among the women of Britain's aristocracy. Queen Victoria summarized his remarks to Prince Albert regarding this dilemma: "He could not marry a Heathen, and an Indian who would become a Christian only to please him, would be very objectionable. Were he to marry a European, his children would be half-caste, which would not do."¹⁸ The royal couple encouraged him to court their godchild, the Indian princess, Gourama of Coorg. But Duleep showed little interest in her, and her own sexual improprieties made her even less suitable in his eyes. In 1864 frustrated by the lack of interest in him among European aristocratic families, he wedded Bamba Müller, an Ethiopian Coptic woman's illegitimate daughter whom a German merchant had adopted.

The other limitation was legal, because the East India Company and its successor, the India Office, held the maharaja's purse strings. Further-

more, these institutions regarded him more with suspicion than the respect that the monarchy accorded him. In spite of Queen Victoria's repeated pleas for a more favorable financial adjustment or a restoration of some of his Indian estates, the India Office continued to treat the maharaja as financial dependent, much as a parent might treat an adolescent child.

In the context of his birth and origins these financial woes must have seemed galling. His frequent need to petition the India Office for money, his financial inability to live as a royal, the circumstances that forced him to marry a woman well beneath his rank—all of these setbacks and compromises must have reminded him of the kingdom and attendant fortune that he had lost as a child. Duleep's failure to achieve a satisfactory settlement with the India Office occurred around the time of two well-publicized wars in which non-European monarchs received radically different, and in Duleep's opinion, better treatment at the hands of British authorities than he had. One was the Zulu War in which Ceteswayo had led his army to initial victory then ultimate defeat. His actions had resulted in the loss of thousands of British soldiers. Yet he retained control of his kingdom as a protectorate of the British empire and received a warm welcome on his visit to England. The second was the war against Ahmed Arabi, an officer in the army of Tewfik Pasha, the khedive of Egypt. British forces crushed Arabi's revolt but allowed the khedive, who had not been involved in the rebellion, to remain on his throne, once again as the ruler of a British protectorate. As Duleep remarked in his letter to *The London Times*, "My case at that time was exactly similar to what the Khedive's is at this moment."¹⁹

It is in this context, of a monarch's personal sense of rank and honor that we must understand Duleep's actions from 1885 to 1890: his reconversion to Sikhism, his contacts with and proclamations of independence to Sikh nationalists, and his journey to Russia to seek the financial and material support of Tsar Alexander III. By the time Duleep visited Russia in 1887, however, the hitherto chilly relations between London and St. Petersburg were beginning to thaw, and the Tsar was unwilling to meet with the maharaja, let alone consider his plea for assistance. Without Russian help, Duleep's hope of restoring his throne evaporated. He spent the remainder of his life in Paris. After he suffered a stroke in 1890, his eldest son, Victor, who was an officer in the British army, persuaded him to petition Queen Victoria for a pardon. With the agreement of the British government, she granted it, thus allowing the maharaja to visit England once again. When he died in 1893 he was buried at Elveden Hall.

Twenty years earlier Queen Victoria and Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone had agreed to place Duleep Singh at the apogee of British society by offering him a peerage. Party politics and changes of government conspired to delay the offer, but by the time it finally arrived in 1880, the maharaja was no longer interested. When Lord Argyll, the Secretary of State for India, visited Elveden to make an alternative offer of peerages for his sons, Victor's British tutor witnessed the meeting and later recalled, the maharaja's reply:

I thank Her Majesty. Most heartily and humbly convey to her my esteem affection and admiration. Beyond that I cannot go. I claim myself to be royal; I am not English, and neither I nor my children will ever become so. Such titles—though kindly offered, we do not need and cannot assume. We love the English and especially their Monarch, but we must remain Sikhs.²⁰

Such a rebuff could hardly have resulted solely from the financial "sorrows of the squire of Elveden." More likely it came from a man who was very conscious of his personal identity as the "son of the 'Lion of Punjab.'"

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1. *The London Times*, 31 August 1882, 7.

2. Although direct criticism of Duleep Singh was confined to confidential government correspondents and editorials in British newspapers, the wife of the maharaja's deceased tutor, Sir John Login, wrote a memoir that portrayed their charge as a good young man who had later gone astray at the behest of Sikh conspirators. See Lady Lena Campbell Login, *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh* (Patiala: n. p., 1890). Since Duleep Singh is a national hero for many Sikhs, he is the subject of official publications of the Sikh community. Recent examples of nationalist portrayals of Duleep Singh include Baladewa Singha Baddana, *Maharaja Duleep Singh: Fighter for Freedom* (Delhi: National Book Shop, 1998) and Prithipal Singh Kapur, ed., *Maharajah Duleep Singh: The Last Sovereign Ruler of the Punjab* (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, 1995). Even the *Maharaja Duleep Singh Correspondence* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1977) is part of a larger series entitled *The Freedom Movement*. For an account, aimed at a general audience, of Duleep's dealings with Sikh nationalists see Christy Campbell, *The Maharaja's Box: An Imperial Story of Conspiracy, Love and a Guru's Prophecy* (London: Harper Collins, 2000). For a scholarly examination of his relationship with Queen Victoria, see Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah: Duleep Singh, 1838-93* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1980). It is perhaps the best treatment of Duleep's life.

3. *The London Times*, 31 August 1882, 5.
4. *The London Times*, 31 August 1882, 7.
5. Baddana, *Maharaja Duleep Singh: Fighter for Freedom*.
6. "The Rebel Prince" at The Maharaja Duleep Singh Centenary Trust, <http://www.mdscet.org.uk/lifestory/LifeStory.htm>, downloaded 11 March 2001.
7. Campbell, *The Maharaja's Box*, xv.
8. Enclosure B to R. D. Watson to Viscount Cross, 28 January 1887, *The Maharaja Duleep Singh Correspondence*, No. 416.
9. See André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics Under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svar_jya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
10. Quoted in Alexander and Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah*, 55.
11. Quoted in Alexander and Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah*, 50
12. Queen Victoria to Viscount Palmerston, 24 December 1857, *Letters of Queen Victoria, 1837-1861*, ed. Arthur Christopher Benson and Viscount Esher (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 3: 327.
13. Quoted in Elizabeth Longford, *Victoria R. I.* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 280.
14. Quoted in Marquess of Lansdowne to Queen Victoria, 13 May 1891, *Letters of Queen Victoria, 1886-1901*, 2: 29.
15. Queen Victoria to the Marquess of Dalhousie, 2 October 1854, *Letters of Queen Victoria, 1837-1861*, 3: 61.
16. Quoted in Alexander and Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah*, 230.
17. See for instance the letter headed "From Sardar Thakur Singh Singhanwalia to His Majesty Maharaja Duleep Singh," 9 November 1883, in *The Maharaja Duleep Singh Correspondence*, No. 162.
18. Quoted in Alexander and Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah*, 65.
19. *The London Times*, 31 August 1882, 5.
20. The tutor was Rev. J. Osborne Jay, whose account is quoted by Bamba Sutherland, Duleep Singh's daughter, in her preface to Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, *Portraits in Norfolk Houses*, ed. Rev. Edmund Farrer (Norwich: Jarrold and Sons, 1928), 1: xiv.