

## The Last Mughal

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The Indian Peninsula has been conquered many times by invading forces. The Mughals certainly were not the first ones, yet in a sense they were to be the last ones. The British presence was at first very tenuous with a few trading strongholds along the coast. Bombay, Madras and Calcutta being the major ones. Then by a sequence of military involvements exploiting the fractions between the ruling princes, they exerted more and more influence and wielded increasing military power, although they were still formally vassals of the Mughal emperors, whose tax-collectors they served as. While the Europeans initially no doubt were in awe of the splendour of the Mughal empire and its wealth, and many of the traders and officials used to adopt the local customs and mores, conversions not being unheard of. However, as the 19th century broke, those habits of tolerance and emulations became increasingly rare, and instead a different mode of arrogance coupled with a condescending missionary zeal to improve the natives took hold. One may speculate as to why. Certainly the increased political and military power and the subsequent marginalization of the Indian princes played a major role, maybe also the ideas of Enlightenment and Christian revival contributed as well. By the 1850's the Mughal empire had been reduced to a formality maintained and tolerated by the British. One after one of the formal tributes to the Mughal, such as coining the currency with his image, were discontinued. The Mughal Zafar II, who was to be destined to become the last of a line stretching back for some 350 years, was already an elderly man, but residing in a splendid court in Delhi, being the focus of a cultural renaissance. The King himself was an accomplished poet in Urdu and Persian, but more to the point he was surrounded by poets whom he encouraged. His residence the Red Fort was a walled in complex studded with jewels of Muslim architecture set in exquisite gardens, many of which were personally overseen and arranged by the regent himself. Yet for all this the British were determined that when it came to his successor, there would be a removal from the splendid settings, which were seen more and more as anachronisms. While at the same time the residences of the British representatives became progressively more and more imposing as if in competition. Certainly it was true that the Mughal way of ruling was an anachronism of former Oriental autocracy, not to say despotism, even if the present Mughal was a modest and mild-mannered man.

One of the remarkable fact of the growing British influence was that in terms of European man-power they never amounted to much. For every British residence there were a retinue of native servants, and the armies themselves were mostly made up of native soldiers, so called Sepoys, while the commanding positions were exclusively maintained by the British. It may be considered a mystery why such a multitude of natives would so submissively accept the rules of foreigners, on the other hand the ruling dynasties of the Indian peninsula had all been foreigners, the Mughals of Persian and Turkish provenance. But of course those foreign rulers and their ways were always being adopted and modified by the native population, a natural tendency that, as we have noted, had been interrupted

by the British. Anyway the mutiny that spontaneously broke out and spread as if by rapid contagion had at its source, what to the British must have been a most trifling excuse, a rumour that the fat with which the bullets were greased in order to move through the new rifled rifle pipes, were of pigs, and as the soliders were forced to bit them off before being pushed into the pipes, they were then subjected to an affront of their religious sensibilities. Clearly the British with more tact and understanding would have been easily able to deflect this grievance, but the point was that they had no such tact nor understanding, and the issue was more of an excuse to vent a growing frustration that had mounted over decades and clearly emphasized the growing rift between the Europeans and the Natives. The mutiny took the British by surprise, and of course it provided an overwhelming challenge to British rule, based as it was not on overwhelming man-power but on understanding and conventions of supremacy.

Most of the Sepoys rebelling were high caste Hindus, while they descended upon the Mughal emperor in Delhi in order to enlist him as their figurehead and restore the lapsed supremacy of his empire and drive off the 'Kafirs'. The arrival of the Sepoys in Delhi was clearly a mixed blessing at best, and provided a challenge as well as an opportunity that the elderly King was not up to, especially as the making of decision had never been his strong side, political effective rule never having been an option to him during his reign. On one hand the rubble was as much of a threat to the city as its saviour. They looted and proceeded to slaughter all the British they could lay their hands on, but characteristically saving those who had converted. Likewise Christian converts among the Natives were hounded down and killed. The Sepoys invaded the Palace, showing the regent little respect as he proved unable to reign them in, and was aghast at the wanton murders they committed. On the other hand the swelling armies, asked him for his blessings, and he clearly saw that in this Uprising there was a hope for him and his dynasty to survive and revive, and most reluctantly he agreed.

The British were in dire straits, and all over Northern India atrocities were committed against British civilians, sparing neither women nor children. Such excesses on part of the natives, no doubt also exaggerated, deeply disturbed the Europeans, and the latent and relatively benign racism which had developed for half a century or more turned rapidly into the most rabid ones in which the dark multitudes of the subcontinent were seen as fiends and not fellow human beings. The thirst for revenge was awoken and its retribution would take a terrible toll. But this was in the future. In May 1857 the future of the British Empire was very uncertain. Delhi was taken, among other cities in the north, but it was to Delhi that the conflict assumed its focus, and hence the storming and conquest of the city was seen as the major objective.

The whole Uprising, strong in its spontaneity and enthusiasm suffered crucially from a lack of organization and purpose. Well organised and disciplined, with a hierarchy of clearly delineated objectives, it probably would have driven out the British in a few months, instead the tables were turned. The city was besieged for a few months by a rather small British force consisting mostly of Sikhs and Gurkas, labouring under the most adverse circumstances plagued by heat and diseases. In fact the Sepoy forces were a few times close to having subdued the besiegers, exploiting the very weakness of their positions, but the advantages were never pushed to the end, in spite of the bravery and skill with which the

British trained Sepoys fought. One reads the very detailed narrative hoping against hope that the British would be demolished, on the other hand by the logic of all counterfactual speculation and hope, how would we have read the story had the Sepoys won? In spite of some desperate measure of organization and attempts at military strategy, especially by one of the Princes, the large Sepoy army could never really get its act together. For one thing it was starving, the authorities having failed to control the Hinterland of Delhi and impose tax on its citizens. The army fed on loot and extortion, to which the Palace itself was far from exempt. Furthermore bands of Gujars surrounded the city and by their presence effected a blockade far more efficient than what the British would ever have hoped to effect. Finally the British received reinforcements, the bastions of the city fell and they gained access to it. But even now everything was lost, as the British would find out almost at their peril, once the military confrontation degenerated into street-to-street fighting the native resistance increased and the invaders were more than once close to being thrown out. At a crucial venture the Mughal emperor vacillated when he was asked to head the troops. This understandable failure of nerve of an old monarch, led to a collapse of morale and the British were given the city.

Being victorious they started out to effect a terrible revenge, basically killing everyone in sight buoyed by a sense of divine retribution. The British army was filled with psychopaths in commanding positions, perverted raisins in a dough of deeply entrenched prejudice. What mattered was the color of your skin, not your loyalties and religion, something many British loyalists among the Natives would find out at their peril. The already looted city was now looted to its bone, the part of the population which was not outright killed was driven out of the city left to fend for itself, mostly succumbing to starvation and disease. What was left after the initial bloodbaths were empty gutted houses. To add the supreme insult to already boundless injury, plans were made to completely raze the city to the ground, leaving no brick standing, regardless of aesthetic consideration. But things started to go so far that a more moderate backlash evolved, but then of course too late. In the end the city was not levelled to the ground and completely obliterated, although this fate was almost achieved for the Red Fort itself, which now survives only with its bastions and a few scattered buildings inside, now constituting almost pointless remainders of a past splendour, once they were deprived of their surrounding gardens.

The King himself was taken prisoner, while most of his children were murdered. His life was spared, but he was deeply humiliated and put on trial being accused of being the evil mastermind of the whole Uprising. He was old and senile but managed nevertheless to mount an eloquent defence, one which was of course not allowed to be pursued to its logical conclusion. The judge was already set on the verdict, the punishment of which would have been death, had he not felt bound by an initial reassurance given at the capture of respecting the life of the King. The verdict concocted by the judge was a fantastic tale with little basis in facts and inspired by Islamophobic obsessions. In fact, what many British observers could not but note, there was in fact no legal basis for trying the Mughal emperor. He certainly could not be tried as a traitor and muntineer, he was not the subject of the British, in fact it was the other way around, the British were formally vassals to him.

The life of the King was spared, but he was exiled to Rangoon in Burma, where he

died a few years later at the advanced age of 87, buried without ceremonies in an unmarked grave hoping to achieve a total obliteration of memory<sup>1</sup>. The British Dominion of India would continue for another ninety years until independence in 1947. Obviously it had its deep impact, but as the author notes, the Sepoy mutiny and its brutal suppression, did not so much instigate changes as confirming what had already developed quietly in the preceding decades. Still one may make a few valiant points.

First and foremost it illustrated colonial arrogance and cruelty. The Swedish writers Myrdal and Lindquist argue that what shocked Western Europeans about Hitler, was that he adopted Colonial practices to Europeans themselves. Myrdal argues that the blood-thirstiness of the British put the Nazis to shame. What the latter did out of duty, the former did with abandon and enjoyment. Surely when it comes to atrocities, those committed by the British certainly could be set along those of the Nazis, and in fact one may convincingly argue that the racism exhibited by the British was far more virulent than what the Germans mustered against the Jews and the Slavs<sup>2</sup>. One may also argue conclusively that the number of victims of British Rule in India actually exceeded those that the Nazis had time to exterminate<sup>3</sup>. Thus in many ways it is remarkable that the British have never been forced to publicly acknowledge their crimes against humanity. Certainly reading this book one is filled with indignation, although the book can in no way be accused of being a diatribe, being for the most part a factual presentation of what happened based on available sources<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the British sources dominating, means that the narrative is still biased against the natives, as it is only with the British, with a few exceptions, we are treated to individuals, while the Sepoys themselves appear as an undifferentiated mass to the reader, no doubt the way they also did appear to the British themselves at the time. Still in all fairness one must make some important distinctions. True it may be that the British contained a fair amount of psychopaths (the son of the British Resident Metcalfe being one case in point, being driven to almost moral debilitation by his own sufferings, and perhaps more to the point the Commander Nicholson, who appears an almost innate monster, with no extenuating factors like provocation, to modify the verdict) who revelled in the killing, and that there no way especially no genetic nor any cultural way in which to distinguish cruelties of Germans from those of the British, claiming innateness in the former case, both people incidentally being very close genetically and culturally. Still while

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<sup>1</sup> In fact the whereabouts of his grave were preserved by collective memory, in the early 1900's the British allowed an enclosure to be erected as a memorial, and fairly recently, his stone coffin, along with his preserved skeleton was unearthed fortuitously in connection with some work. He is now venerated as a Sufi saint by his followers.

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly this may to a large extent be explained by the fact that Jews and Slavs are racially more or less indistinguishable from the Germans themselves, so strictly speaking we are not really talking about racism technically when we discuss Nazi atrocities.

<sup>3</sup> Isolated atrocities, no matter how deeply they affect the imagination, do in fact contribute but marginally to general statistics. As in the case of Delhi, even if the streets were awash with the putrifying bodies of slaughtered Sepoys, the greatest tolls were taken out of sight and hence out of mind, through slow starvation and general deprivation suffered by displacement.

<sup>4</sup> The author claims in his introduction that his work is the first which exploits in addition to the traditional British sources also those of the native side.

in Nazi Germany there were no dissenting voices of authority, those did after all develop, as noted above, in England. Disraeli noted that there was no excuse in countering atrocity with atrocity, and the excesses of some of the more enthusiastic individuals were deplored and Sir Theo Metcalfe, referred to as above, was eventually relieved of any authority and his career was effectively halted, yet of course he was never brought to trial. Furthermore one must admit that the reaction of the British, however, disproportionate, was not altogether unprovoked. Still on the balance, the indulgence with which not only British opinion (no doubt enflamed by the media) but also British authorities treated those who suppressed the mutiny, would be deeply embarrassing today.

On a more political level, indignation apart, the outrage against the Uprising was inspired by no deeper understanding of Indian society. The malevolent force was identified as Islam, although the mutiny started among high-caste Hindus, albeit supplanted by Muslim Jihads. This Islamophobia must have deeper explanations, and it is natural to assume that it goes back to the threat that the Islam civilization for centuries has posed to the Christian, a fossilized fear that incredibly survive to this day and age, when Islam once again has become the western center of paranoia, after having momentarily been eclipsed by the fear of world-wide Communism. In fact the rhetorics employed against the Muslims at the time is eerily reminiscent of the one which is nowadays unembarrassingly voiced, not the least by the present American Administration, a fact that does not pass unnoticed by the author. The case being that in the 1850's Islam and Hinduism were in many ways deeply entrenched. The Islam of India was very different from say the Islam of Persia or the Ottoman Empire, being very much modified by the indigenous culture. In fact Zafir himself, the last Mughal emperor, had a Hindu mother, and his religious proclivities were marked by tolerance and sympathy, in such a contrast with the present rift between Muslims and Hindus. In fact the author argues that this present rift can be directly traced to the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny'. Ironically, as noted repeatedly above, while the Mutiny was set off by Hindus, it became progressively identified in the muddled British mind with Muslim resurgence. Thus in the decades to come, the rage of the British administration was vented against the Muslims and especially against the traces of the Mughal empire., effectively killing the Indo-Muslim culture with which it was associated. Not only did the court tradition of Urdu poetry come to an end<sup>5</sup> also the distinguished tradition of Muslim architecture (to which literally millions of foreign tourists pay homage by visiting the Taj Mahal) came to a complete stop, being replaced by vulgar Victorian. In this climate the Hindus saw an opportunity to ingratiate themselves with the British masters, and instead of having formally embraced Islam, and in so doing changing it, they now progressively started to view Islam as a foreign intrusion. This led to a religious Hindu revival, and in fact it is argued that many of the old age Hindu traditions are but 19th century revivals, and in some cases maybe even inventions. This rift between Hindus and Muslims, partly inadvertently provoked, partly intentionally exploited,

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the moving parts of the book entail the court poet Ghalib, who accidentally suffered no strictly personal misfortune, his bodily integrity as well as that of his possession being respected, who laments as in many ways its sole survivor the demise of a cultural world. In particular his own poems, which he had not personally written down, but had been preserved in a few personal libraries which had, however, been ransacked in the chaos of the Delhi conquest.

by the British, did erupt during partition, when most of the Muslim elite escaped to Pakistan<sup>6</sup>. The antagonism continues, now both at a more exalted level in the tension between Pakistan and India with overt nuclear threats, and as so called communal violence within Indian communities replete with massacres. Now in all honesty one should be careful attributing this rift entirely to the British policies of the post mutiny era, rifts between religious and ethnic communities tend often to arise by themselves, as the world has seen with sickening repetition. On the other hand one should stay away from counterfactual speculation, and note that even if that rift may have developed anyway, we know nothing of such a hypothetical flow of events, what we know can in most cases be traced back to British attitudes and actions of the late 19th century of which the brutal suppression of the mutiny plays a central role.

It is true that the Mughal dynasty was an anachronism and that the 'Oriental' despotism of which it sprung, no longer has a place in the modern world, in which Democratic values and institutions have come to stay, so in many ways it would be hypocritical to mourn its demise. Still had it been allowed its gentle decline, it would not only have bequeathed a splendid architectural legacy (to the delight of many world-wide visitors to Old Delhi) but also a rich and tolerant culture, allowing yet another rival to the consumer-centered ideologies of the modern Western world. Multi-culturality is nowadays a buzz-word, but it often entails nothing much more than a curiosity for exotic dishes and dress, occasionally spiced with excentric superstitions, but the truth is that its fate is parallel to that of declining bio-diversity, both being the victims of mono-lithic economic globalization.

In fact, as the author notes, the eventual political revival of India was not through a reinstatement of a former Mughal empire, this tradition being irrevocably compromised by defeat, but through a British educated elite, who spoke English and not Persian, developing the Western institutions and infra-structures. The groundwork for which had already been laid by the colonisers,

The book presents a rather detailed narrative, as behooves a work based on years of careful pouring over primary sources while trying to patch together a coherent story. The problem with such an approach is that it would work more effectively if presented in novelistic form. Now the general flow of the narrative is marred by the inevitable patchwork of paraphrase and eye-witness account, the seams of which detract from the narrative itself. The undue emphasis on the narrative and its minute details also distract from asking the important questions a historical work should properly address. The Sepots are described as a rubble, low-class people terrorizing a civilian population. But were they not all high-caste Hindus, and as such rather finicky and refined? Those are just one of the very many questions an engaged reader cannot help to ask puzzlingly. However many characters do come alive on the page, even Zafar himself, although he cannot be quoted, unlike many of the British characters, in his own voice. This user-friendly feature does indeed, as it no doubt is meant to do, help to make history and the unfolding of historical events personal and thus easier to commit to memory.

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<sup>6</sup> But of course not all Muslims emigrated, in fact most I believe stayed on, making India I guess the country with the largest Muslim population in the world.

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