

THE MEN WHO MATTERED

The Sikhs differ both from the Muslims and the Hindus and are fiercely proud of the difference. They believe in an indefinable Super sBeing or God whose principles and tenets have been brought to earth by a succession of ten holy men or gurus, most of whom were also extremely doughty fighters. The places where the gurus breathed their last (usually in battles against the Moghuls and Muslims) are principally in Northern India, the most important being in Western Punjab at Ninkhana Sahib. Their Rome, Mecca, Canterbury, call it what you will, is the fabulous Golden Temple at Amritsar, set in a holy lake or tank filled with enormous carp and orfe. But like the other temples or gurudwaras where the Sikhs go to pay their religious respects, the Golden Temple is open to anyone of any religion and a pilgrim can always find food there and shelter for the night (though in times of trouble, a Muslim would have been foolhardy to go near one). Anyone can join the Sikhs by conversion. It is not a 'difficult' religion in the sense that there is a great deal of ritual or dogma to be learned, but of its male converts it demands five things and the rejection of another. These are known as the five 'K's' —les or the long hair and beard which distinguishes Sikhs from all other Indians (and makes a male swimming pool filled with bathing Sikhs a wondrous sight to behold); kanghi or a comb to be worn in the hair; kaccha or short underwear; karra or a steel or iron bracelet on the right wrist; and kirpan or a short but highly lethal knife. These, except possibly the kanghi when swimming, must be worn at all times.

A Sikh may drink any liquor he likes, but he is expressly forbidden to smoke. There was a riot in Bombay some years ago when a newspaper published a cartoon showing a Sikh smoking a hookah. There are some Sikhs who have started to cut their hair and shave their beards, but they usually live in the big cities outside the Punjab and are wryly known as 'mechanized Sikhs' (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 55-56)

An old man with a white beard, twinkling brown eyes, a voice like a dove in conversation and like a hawk in public speech, with a fierce hatred of the Muslims and an ambition to be the first head of a new independent State called Khali stun. His name was Master Tara Singh. 'Whatever is decided in Delhi,' cried Tara Singh, 'will leave my people like no man's children in no man's land!'

Tara Singh was a guru who had earned the courtesy title of Master for his knowledge of the Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture which is lodged in the Golden Temple, and for his teaching of the Sikh way of life, which he once summed up as: 'To eschew idolatry, caste exclusiveness, the burning of widows (suttee), the immurement of women for adultery, the immoderate use of wine and drugs, tobacco smoking, the killing of infants, slander, bathing in the sacred tanks of the Hindus; and to promote loyalty, gratitude, philanthropy, impartiality, justice for all, truth, honesty, decency and gentleness. Tara was 71 years old in 1947. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 57)

The Indians whom Ambedkar led were, however, the Untouchables or, as they were dubbed by the British, the 'Scheduled Castes', and it was one thing to have them as followers and another

to persuade them to utilize their undoubted strength at the polling booths. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 57)

In the caste society of the Hindus, they were literally the outcasts. They believed in Hindu gods, but no temple was open to them in which to worship. Theirs were always the menial jobs—the sweepers, the laundry-men, leather workers (all religiously despised trades)—and the future for them and their children was predestined. They could never hope to rise to better things. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 58)

The caste system at work in India, particularly its appalling degradation of the lowest orders, wondered why the Untouchables never left their religion and became Christians or Muslims. In fact, many of them did.

Such a cowed and submissive section of humanity would hardly seem fertile material for an ambitious politician

Ambedkar was an Untouchable himself. As a child begging at a race' meeting he caught the eye of one of the Gaekwars of Baroda, who was touched by his brightness and quick intelligence, paid for his schooling, and eventually sent him to Columbia University, New York. Thereafter, he studied in Germany and Britain (at the London School of Economics) and returned to India a lawyer (yes, another) with an ambition to rise in the Civil Service. He got a job as a clerk. Immediately, all the other clerks boycotted him. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 58-59)

By this time he was an embittered man. Burning with hatred against the Hindu Caste system, he resolved to attack it through the Untouchables and he formed a party to represent them, which soon gained large support in the bigger cities. The British began to take an interest in him. They sent him to London to represent the Untouchables at the Round Table Conference, a move which shrewdly cut across Congress's claims to represent all Indians, or even all Hindus. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 59)

Even before Independence there were two Indias', not one. There was British India, ruled by the Viceroy from Delhi and with British Governors in all its eleven provinces.

There was also the India of the Princely States. In area, the States covered two-fifths of the sub-Continent. In population, they contained something over 80,000,000, or just under a quarter of India's total population. There were 601 Princely and native States in all, ranging in size from the vast kingdom of Hyderabad in Central India, with 14,000,000 people and a territory bigger than Britain minus Scotland, to several small States in Kathiawar, West India, with only 900 people and less than ten square miles of land. They were ruled by maharanas, maharajahs, nawabs, rajahs, jagadirs, and by a Gaekwat (of Baroda), a Jam Sahib (of Nawanagar), a Nizam (of Hyderabad), and a Wālā (of Swat). They were rich and they were poor. The Nizam of Hyderabad was so rich that he could afford to be a miser. The Maharajah of Kashmir was so rich that he bought hundreds of concubines and dancing girls at £ 20 - £ 50,000 apiece and once paid £ 150,000 (in blackmail) for one Hour with a female crook in a London hotel bedroom. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 60)

There were good princes and there were bad princes. The Maharajah of Mysore ran a model state on such civilized lines that the standard of living of his people was far above that of the rest of India. The Maharajah of Travancore was so enlightened that he opened his Hindu temples to Untouchables—a bold step indeed in caste-ridden Southern India. The Maharajah of Kashmir on the other hand, though 95 percent of his people were Muslims, ran his state as a strictly Hindu Kingdom and beef-eating Muslims got seven years in jail to they were caught killing a cow.

The Nawab of Junagadh spent more money per year on his kennels of dogs than on hospitals. The Maharajah of Al war once poured petrol over a race horse and set fire to it when it failed to win. And a large portion of the princes spent more time in Monte Carlo, Paris and London than they ever did in their own palaces.

Yet all these Princes had one thing in common. They were independent of Delhi and of any laws passed by the Government in Delhi. They acknowledged only one paramount authority, and that was the British Crown. He had his own private army, he ran and took the revenues from the Customs between his state and British India. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 61)

Though it should be pointed out that certain States preferred to stay out of the Chamber of Princes—notably Hyderabad. Mysore and Travancore. They had their own highly-skilled prime ministers (hired administrators, paid s fixed salary) through whom they preferred to put their case. The Nizam of Hyderabad also retained Sit Walter (now Lord) Moncton to advice him. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 62)

He ruled, in fact, like a feudal monarch of olden times. This anachronistic agglomeration of Princes had another thing in common besides its separation from British India, and that was fear—fear that when freedom came to British India, the States Would be absorbed against their will, their titles abolished, their personal power and privileges lopped away, their vast private fortunes suddenly made subject to taxes. In the circumstances, few of them wished for freedom to come to India at all, though the more enlightened of them realized that it was inevitable. For self-protection they had formed themselves, some years before rite war, into a Chamber of Princes by which they hoped to present a combined front in face of the political agitations and developments germinating just beyond their frontiers. The Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes in 1947, when Mountbatten arrived as Viceroy, was a Muslim, the Nawab of Bhopal, and in this royal trade union Bhopal was the chief shop steward with whom the new Viceroy would have to deal. He was a shrewd and able negotiator who had inherited his throne from his mother in 1926 (she abdicated in his favour to prevent another claimant from getting it), and had since run his State with a firm but autocratic hand. India's Princes usually counted their importance in terms of the number of gun salutes they were entitled to receive on ceremonial occasions. There were five 21-gun States, Hyderabad, Mysore, Baroda, Kashmir, and Gwalior. Bhopal was a 19-gun prince, which put him above such rivals as Jaipur, Jodhpur and Bikaner, and this, plus a driving personality, made him a potent influence in a body whose members were apt to be as lackadaisical and apathetic as some trade union members in Britain and America. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 62-63)

The Princely States would get back all those powers which they had formerly turned over to the British; they would be completely independent; and they would be completely free to make their own arrangements, on their own terms, for federation with the newly-freed India beyond their frontiers. In this way, Bhopal hoped to put the Chamber of Princes in an immensely strong position to bargain for their thrones. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 63)

Hyderabad and its remarkable Nizam was to prove the most important. In addition to being a miser with a private fortune which was reputed to make him the richest man in the world, the Nizam was a Muslim of distinguished lineage, who traced his ancestry back to Ghazi-ud-din Khan Feroz Jang, one of the generals of the Moghul Emperor, Aurangzeb. He succeeded to his throne in 1911, and in 1918, as a reward for the soldiers from his private army and the money he provided to help Britain in the Great War, he was granted the hereditary title of His Exalted Highness. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 64)

The Nizam had no intention of seeing them or himself in even the loosest federation with an independent India, particularly with Congress, whose members he loathed and despised. In Sardar Patel's phrase, have created 'an enemy country in the belly of India'. His sympathies were wholly with Jinnah but his ambitions for Hyderabad were otherwise engaged.

In 1946 he sent his regent, the Nawab of Chhatari, and his legal adviser, Sir Walter Monckton, to see Lord Wavell in Delhi, an occasion on which he stressed that Hyderabad would assume complete independence after the transfer of power. He hoped, by an arrangement with the Portuguese Government, to make the Portuguese Indian possession of Goa into Hyderabad's port. Sir Conrad Corfield, the son of the Vicar of Finchhampstead in Berkshire was head of the Political Department in Delhi whose task it was to look after the interests of Princely States. It was he who appointed the British Resident to each State to advise the rulers. It was he who acted as liaison between the Chamber of Princes and the Viceroy. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 65)

Jinnah occasionally sported a monocle. His leathery, cadaverous face (he had sunken cheeks, even in early middle-age) and bright, burning, luminous eyes gave him the appearance of an emaciated brontosaurus, but when he smiled his face was transformed, and the expression was of gentle amiability. He was immensely proud of his appearance and he could never avoid a sneer when he had to mix with the khaki-clad members of Congress, who made a fad of their peasant clothes. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 66)

Both held power over their followers by sheer personality. 'You have mesmerized the Muslims,' Gandhi once accused Jinnah. 'And you have hypnotized the Hindus,' he replied. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 67)

At the age of thirty, now comfortably off, he joined the Congress Party. A few years later, he also joined the Muslim League. There was no incongruity in this. His main aim was to bring about Hindu-Muslim unity. Beckoned them along new and dangerous paths to Indian freedom. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 68)

It was a fellow-Muslim who secured the cheers of the assembly by jumping to his feet and repudiating him by saying: 'You talk too much of the constitutional way. It reminds me of story of a young Tory who came out of the Carlton Club one evening and walked up to Piccadilly Circus, where there was a Salvation Army meeting in progress. The speaker was saying, "Come this way—it is God's way." The young Tory interrupted him and said, "How long have you been preaching this?" "Twenty years," replied the Salvationist. "Well," said the Tory, "if it's only got you as far as Piccadilly Circus, I don't think much of it".

Jinnah faded out of the Congress Party. He not only did not agree with Gandhi's 'rabble rousing', as he called it, but also realized that his personality would have no chance of succeeding with Congress and securing him the leadership he coveted so long as its members were dazzled by Gandhi's 'Hindu revivalism'. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 68-69)

According to Mr. Nehru, Jinnah accepted the leadership of the Muslim League gave him a chance to lash back at Gandhi and those Congress delegates who had snubbed him. And, Nehru added, he subsequently directed the Muslim League's policy along the road of separatism and anti-Hinduism not because he really believed in Islam and Pakistan, but because it was a policy which would win him easy attention and secular power. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 70)

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu (who was to be the first woman provincial governor in independent India). She was madly in love with Jinnah and sent him love poems, in which she wrote such phrases as, 'in the desolate hours of midnight. . . my soul hungers for thy voice, which embarrassed him considerably (he was never a man to read poetry). It was not to Mrs. Naidu's blandishments that his heart opened. At a reception in Bombay he was introduced to a beautiful girl. Her name was Rutten Pettit. The fact that she was a Parsec and only seventeen years old—and the daughter, moreover, of one of his friends and business associates—did not swerve Jinnah from his determination to marry her. Nor did furious parental opposition. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 70-71)

In 1947, he was 71 and looked it. But not once you heard him talk. He was known as Quaid-i-Azam, or great leader, and the title was deserved. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 72)

An enthusiastic debater and one of those public speakers who loves to 'mix it' with a hostile or restive audience. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 72)

Liaquat, on the other hand, was a reader and scholar, but a great popular orator too. Liaquat Ali Khan once said of Lord Mountbatten: 'I hear that he has come to India most reluctantly and his real ambition is to be Admiral of the Fleet. If he will grant us Pakistan at once, we will devote our first budget to building him a battleship and will even supply him with a crew – Azad as laundryman, Nehru as steersman (which means he will never come within miles of us), and Gandhi for hot air to breathe into the boilers. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 73)

Of all the personalities—statesmen, politicians, soldiers, administrators—involved in the last chapter of Britain’s Indian story, he alone emerges with his stature undiminished. It is true that there were times when his behaviour was questionable, his statements equivocal, his actions disingenuous, but in the last days his achievements were immeasurably, triumphantly and devotedly for the good of his people, no matter what their caste or religion. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 73)

Although Kasturbai, his wife, was illiterate and he was anxious to teach her, ‘lustful love left no time’. Gradually, but not until after he had sired three children, Gandhi’s sense of guilt over the potency of his sexual urge crystallized into a determination to eschew it. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 74)

Gandhi changed all that. He changed the name of the Home Rule Association to Swaraj (or Our Raj). He spoke passionately against the British and advocated Civil Disobedience—and though he was cast down when the Indian people proved to be anything but civil in the way they disobeyed, he gradually turned the act of national non-co-operation into a massive weapon. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 74-75)

He led the great March through India which culminated in a ceremonial making of salt on the seashore at Dandi—a protest not so much against the Government salt monopoly as a symbolic gesture against their very existence. He went to jail, and enjoyed it. He began his first great fast in an effort to bring Hindus and Muslims together, and his closeness to death so gripped the nation that the two peoples jointly pleaded with him—on promise of permanent brotherliness—to eat. He fasted many times after that. He went to jail again. By the time the war came in 1939, he was the greatest influence in the nation.

In many ways, Gandhi was a saint. The three great aims of his life were Indian freedom, the unity of his people, Hindus and Muslims, and the betterment of the lot of the Untouchables. For these three goals, he was willing to suffer and die. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 75)

In 1947, when Mountbatten arrived in Delhi, Gandhi was on a peace mission in Bihar, where Hindus had been savagely murdering Muslims and destroying their property. Congress called him back. The Working Committee had a shrewd idea that Mountbatten, unlike Wavell, would be hypnotized by Gandhi’s personality. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 76)

The British succeeded in dominating India by a succession of fortuitous circumstances and flukes. With remarkably little effort, considering the glittering prize, they won a great empire and enormous wealth ... It seems easy for a slight turn in events to have taken place which would have dashed their hopes and ended their ambitions.’ After which he adds: ‘And yet a closer scrutiny reveals, in the circumstances then existing, a certain inevitability in what happened.’ (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 76)

Nehru's own apotheosis in the Congress Party and India, His road to supreme power, to benevolent autocracy, over the Indian people was a pilgrim's progress full of pitfalls and side-roads, any one of which, but for coincidence and flukes, might have sidetracked him. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 76)

The formative years of his life were spent in an atmosphere calculated to turn him into a copy of a typical, cultivated English gentleman. At home in Allahabad, where his father was a prosperous lawyer, Jawaharlal was brought up in surroundings of great luxury and of continuous English influence.

He had a succession of English tutors. The house was always filled with guests, mostly British, although Hindus and Muslims came frequently too. (Nehru's father ran three separate kitchens to cater for their tastes.) He made only scanty progress in Hindi and Sanskrit, but was quickly fluent in English; and from the age of fifteen, when he went to Harrow, until the age of 22, when he returned from Cambridge via London, a lawyer himself, he was soaked in English background and tradition. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 77)

And then Jallianwala Bagh occurred the Amritsar massacre, in which troops under the command of General Dyer cut down and slaughtered Indians demonstrating for Congress on 13 April, Hindu New Year's Day, 1919. There is no doubt that the Indians were there illegally, for martial law had been declared in the city some days before (after riots in which five Europeans had been killed), and certainly the Congress leaders who incited them to demonstrate in such conditions must share the blame for the tragedy that followed. But General Dyer's method of keeping order was of just the blunderingly ruthless, unimaginative kind to provoke rather than quiet a tense city. It was enough for him to order curfews and rigid enforcement of the laws against assembly; but he did more than that. An Englishwoman, Miss Alice Sherwood, who had done great work among the Indians as a medical missionary, had been criminally assaulted during the rioting of the previous days, a lamentable act of violence against a real friend of India. But Miss Sherwood would have been the first to protest against the result of her appalling experience: General Dyer enforced an order that all Indians who passed the spot where she had been attacked must do so on hands and knees. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 77-78)

And in Jallianwalla Bagh, a public park from which there was only one exit, 20,000 of them were suddenly confronted by 150 British soldiers, read the Riot Act by a British officer, and ordered to disperse, an impossibility since the soldiers blocked the only way out. In the subsequent shooting 379 were killed and over 1,000 were wounded.

It was, of course, a tragic dilemma in which the British found themselves—and, as I have said, the guilt of Congress for it is great—but more flexible British soldiers in the past have coped with such problems without having to resort to massacre. What is certain is that the Amritsar shootings turned most Indians, including those who had co-operated willingly before, into resentful and mistrustful minions, conscious that the British who ruled them regarded their lives as unimportant and their race as inferior. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 78)

They took a great pleasure in reciting all the details of the Amritsar killing, and one of them remarked that 'this will teach the bloody browns a lesson'. By the time the train reached its destination, Jawaharlal Nehru had undergone a transformation. He smouldered with resentment, humiliation, even hatred of the British. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 79)

His burning sense of insult developed into a fierce resolve to rid India of the English after an incident in the Princely State of Nabha, in 1923. He and some companions, who had gone to investigate conditions there, were arrested and thrown into jail. To Nehru's indignation they were first handcuffed together and marched through the streets of the town like common criminals. The prison cell was verminous and alive with rats, and the nights in which they scampered across his face stayed in his memory for all time.

Nehru's indignation was wafted to fever heat by the sight of the British Resident sitting idly by while the farcical trial went on; a trial which resulted in sentences of eighteen months in prison each. They were subsequently suspended and Nehru and his companions expelled from the State, but Nehru was seriously ill with typhoid for some months afterwards.

These were the events which turned him from a dilettante, carbon-copy Englishman into a Congress fighter. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 80)

Gandhi always took the rudeness of ignorant Englishmen in his stride. Once, when one of them in South Africa called to him on a railway station. 'Hey, coolie, pick up that bag', he obediently trotted with it to the man's, carriage. He rather treasured Winston Churchill's, description of him as a 'half-naked fakir'. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 80)

In 1936, an equally fortuitous sequence of circumstances got him the leadership of the party. It was the year when the first general elections were to take place in India, following the introduction of the reforms of 1935. Before going to the polls. Congress met and decided that it must elect a dynamic leader. For most of the party, there was one obvious choice. This was Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the strong man from Bombay. Patel was the man who ran the Congress Party machine, held rebels and recalcitrants in line, and kept the policy of the party respectable enough to keep the contributions flowing in from pro-Congress millionaires. He was a middle-of-the-road capitalist. Nehru was a socialist. There is little doubt that, by use of the party machine, he could have swung enough support behind himself to win the day. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 80-81)

Azad was the studious, scholarly advocate of reason and logic, an apostle of patience and compromise. Patel was the iron fist of Congress, which rarely even bothered to wear a velvet glove. He believed in hammering out agreements by sheer force and weight of numbers. At this moment, Azad believed he would be the wrong man to face the crises looming ahead; and he decided to back Nehru, a subtle man like himself (or so he thought) instead. 'I was anxious that the next President,' Azad wrote, 'should be one who agreed with my point of view and would carry out the same policy as I had pursued. After weighing the pros and cons, I came to the conclusion that Jawaharlal should be the next President. (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 82)

His attitude towards the latest developments could perhaps be summed up in a passage from a favourite work, Euripides' *Alcestis*:

There be many shapes of mystery;

And many things God brings to be.

Past hope or fear.

And the end man looketh for cometh not,

And a path is there where no man thought.

Or perhaps in a passage he wrote in prison:

'There was a time, many years ago, when I lived for considerable periods in a state of emotional exaltation, wrapped up in action which absorbed me. Those days of my youth seem far away now, not merely because of the passage of years but far more so because of the ocean of experience and painful thought that separates them from today. The old exuberance is much less now, the almost uncontrollable impulses have toned down, and passion and feeling are much more in check. The burden of thought is often a hindrance, and in the mind where there was once certainty doubt creeps in. Perhaps it is just age...' (The Last Days of the British Raj – Leonard Mosley; pg. 84)

