

Sina M. Mossayeb: Book Review

Lord Curzon: the Last of the British Moghuls by Nayana Goradia. Delhi: Oxford University Press 1993.

Goradia's *Lord Curzon: the Last of the British Moghuls* is a monograph charged with blemished historiography. Her image of the British monarchy, the formative years of Curzon's life, and finally his role as Viceroy appear in a variety of ways. Cumulatively the book is garbled in a maze of inter-disciplinary surveys. She addresses his childhood and adolescence in psycho-analytical terms and interpretative arguments, while diving into his encounters with homosexual-oriented masters at Eton. Goradia's historical analysis of Lord Curzon as viceroy is hardly detached from any sentiment she may espouse toward his role in India. Her political analysis of Curzon's rule and diplomatic relations does not introduce sufficient proof for any argument. Nevertheless, her narrative style of writing renders the book a fancy read, but fails to hold the integrity of academic literature. Her posed words, filled with value judgments, acquit the book of any unbiased merit.

In the first two chapters, Goradia's provision for adequate introductory background of Curzon is surpassed by creating a stereotypical paradigm of British self-exaltation and pomp. Although the book was published in 1993 by Oxford University Press, it would be of no surprise if the date read 1900. In addition, she puts forward speculations and interpretations which seemed to detract from her monograph:

Feats of exceptional endeavor demanded exceptional self-denial. Empire-building for many Victorians became a sublimation of the sexual instince. Libidinal or sexual energy if properly channelized has been known to lead to the highest and most creative human endeavour and to Victorians empire-building was a divine call.¹

Goradia presents two following chapters on the formative years of Curzon's life. Lord Curzon came from a high-status family, traced back to William the Conqueror. Throughout his training in various schools, including Eton, Curzon emerges as a traditionally bred British aristocrat. Goradia explores Curzon's childhood through analyzing his relationship with his parents and governess. She puts forward a counter argument to Curzon's memory of a neglected childhood, saying he was loved and spoiled by his parents. However, by attacking Curzon's complaint of "imagined tormentors," she dismisses the argument that, "*History would hold them responsible for Curzon's increasing authoritarianism in adult life, tracing it to the ego shattering exercises of his childhood.*"² However, she argues that he was loved, moreover spoiled—by both parents and teachers—into believing that he was a "special boy." By establishing this argument she concludes that, "*It is thus one of the supreme ironies of Curzon's life that the care and concern of his parents should have paved the way for his undoing. . . . Curzon thus grew up only being at peace with himself when living up to the goals expected of him.*"³

¹ Goradia, p. 21

² Ibid., p. 34

³ Ibid., p 59-60

Chapter five, entitled *Eros Encountered*, stands out as the most peculiar chapter found in this book. While the gloss of Curzon's association with homosexual-like teachers follows the study of his life, the chapter inherently lacks coherence with the rest of the material presented in the book. Her psycho-analytical survey of his childhood perhaps falls under creative license, but her presentation of Curzon's "sexual" relationship seems altogether out-of-place.

Although she manages to include the latter chapter into a Book about Curzon's duration in India, Goradia finally enters the Indian era of Curzon's life, and dives into the various aspects of his involvement as Viceroy. Throughout the book, the author pays tribute to praiseworthy attributes manifested by Curzon in his life. In fact, she often overlooks his eccentric personality and redirects major flaws to external factors such as his parents, his wife, or his admiring teachers. The Viceroy and his wife were welcomed in a lavish British ceremonial reception upon arriving in India. According to Goradia, "*Being treated like a ruling sovereign made Curzon almost believe he was one.*"⁴ Curzon's self-image lent itself to a superiority complex. Although approaching various princes of India with a message of equality, his tone and speech were often condescending. However, it appears as though Goradia excuses this sort of mannerism by attributing it to his ignorance and up-bringing. Upon his coronation, Curzon saw himself as "the true British Mughal."⁵

Despite Curzon's imperialistic drive, Goradia presents Curzon as an honorary overseer of the Indian peoples. By illustrating his moral reaction to the injustices performed toward Indians by British parties, she gives him the appellation of a "*gentleman.*" The incidents that she recounts include the transgressions of army officers or personnel who committed heinous crimes (i.e. rape on one occasion, and murder on another) and were not judged or punished. Goradia paints his perusal of justice and moral integrity as picture perfect. Furthermore, she establishes his sentiments of respect for the Indian culture through his initiatives of preserving and maintaining Indian monuments throughout the country. Notwithstanding diverging opinion, she practically projects Curzon as a national hero for Indians.

In the final chapters of the book, Goradia analyses his rule in terms of politics. Her survey of Curzon's administrative policies and approaches provide a measure of his ability to maintain unity with other politicians and prominent individuals within the country, including Kitchener (Chief-in-Arms). However her chapter on the partition of Bengal is perhaps one of the most entertaining, if not the most questionable of the book. Although she acknowledges the detrimental impact the partition had on British India, she goes on to say:

Curzon has not yet been forgiven in India for the partition of Bengal. Though he made this out to be an administrative measure to relieve an overburdened state, Indian opinion has always taken the Viceroy's act as a Machiavellian measure to 'divide and rule' India by tearing apart the province along communal lines...⁶

⁴ Ibid., p.149

⁵ Ibid., p.157

⁶ Ibid., p.210

Furthermore, Goradia explains that although the intentions of the partition were indeed to “divide and rule,” it was Police Commissioner Andrew Fraser and Herbert Risely who devised the scheme. Once again, she redirects blame to an external agent. She meagerly deals with Curzon’s double-standard of praising Muslim unity after the partition and his disregard for the minority prior to the division.

In retrospect, although Goradia’s *Lord Curzon: the Last of the British Moghuls* is a fascinating read in terms of a historical novel, it lacks any real coherence and cohesiveness. The monograph of this British noble is spotted with multiple themes, all of which seem incomplete or slanted. Overall she introduces the reader to a personal Curzon, and only touches upon some of the real controversial issues dealing with this politicized figure—considerably the downfall of the British Mughuls. Paradoxically his aim was to create an unprecedented British rule over India, but was left to fulfill his own forgotten words:

I sometimes wonder whether 100 years hence we shall still be ruling India. There is slowly growing up a sort of a national feeling. As such it can never be wholly reconciled to an alien government... I believe a succession of two weak and rash viceroys could bring the whole machine toppling down.⁷

⁷ Ibid., p. 218