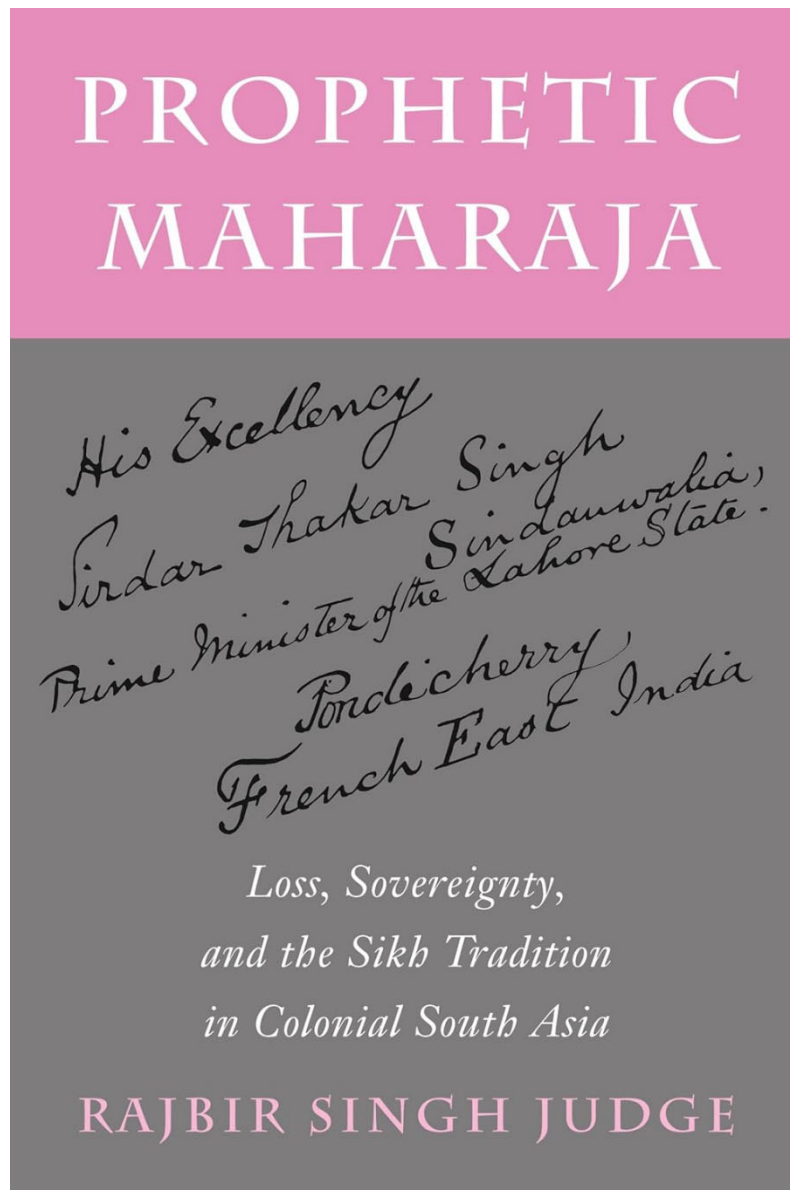


Book review: *Prophetic Maharaja* by *Rajbir Singh Judge*

Review by: Dr. Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan

**Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia**

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ISBN: 978-0231214483

Editorial Note: Rajbir Singh Judge's Prophetic Maharaja was assigned for review prior to Professor Judge's appointment as Chief Editor for Sikh Research Journal. Professor Judge had no role in the review, editing, or publication decision.

Rajbir Singh Judge's *Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia* offers a deeply layered meditation on sovereignty, exile, and memory. This is a work of valour and deep belief: to seek, to examine, and to unravel the strengths and weaknesses of a region, religion, and its people under the larger canopy of the unjust and unjustifiable colonial rule is a profound exercise. As a Sikh, I read this book with two thoughts in mind: first, to see it as a placeholder that defines losses I was aware of but did not understand; second, to understand the cultural pain and violence that Sikhs carry, scars that remain prominent irrespective of how much we try to camouflage them with our versions of history and mythmaking. On these themes, Judge's book makes space for introspection within the community while also offering insights for non-Sikh readers.

Prophetic Maharaja does not add to the books on Duleep Singh; most profoundly, it is not simply about him. It is not righting historical wrongs, nor is it filling any gaps. Yet, as the words flow, Duleep Singh emerges as the Maharaja around whom hopes of a kingdom's resurrection were ignited through the channels of prophecy, rumours, and the retelling of myths. Thus, he becomes the Prophetic Maharaja, in search of his kingdom as ordained, a role that ties him back to his royal origins. He becomes a figure both present and absent, as a blank slate and an unwritten notebook filled in by overlapping perspectives: historical, religious, communal, familial, and colonial.

Through Duleep Singh, Judge constructs a complex structure to provide Sikhism and the Sikh community their place of dignity in social history. However, how does one recreate a person and a land that he has been absent from for thirty-nine years? Memories fade even when they once existed; how can they fade when they never had the chance to form? The book tells the story that follows here: Duleep Singh, a child of five when he was anointed king, was caught not only in the shadows of regional power struggles but also in the deceptive web of extractive colonial institutional politics. Eventually, he was separated from his mother, his friends and caretakers, his language, his food, the waters of Punjab, the air he breathed, his religion, and his identity when he was exiled to unfamiliar England and raised with reluctance.

It is this deepening alienation and eventual resignation to his fate that led to Duleep Singh's passive compliance with British commands and rendered him invisible in the histories Judge relied upon at the outset. *Prophetic Maharaja* begins with the startling premise of whether he even existed. This allowed the author to create a visible Duleep who embodied betrayal, anguish, acceptance, and a sense of profound loss. Perhaps the most poignant of all is the loss of Sikhism and Sikhi. For young Duleep Singh, 'losing' his religion also meant the loss of his princely aura. What remained was an ordinary British subject. Even if it may have initially felt like a burden lifted, this transformation marked the complete erasure of Prince Duleep Singh and thus the last heir of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The book is structured through various scaffoldings that allow the reader to observe the prince through his actions and inactions: his acceptance of a prophetic mantle, submissions to the entreaties of family, community, and faith, and finally his surrender to colonial power. As the scaffolding progressively rises, we get a well-rounded view of the lost child, the grown-up man, an astonishingly adaptable personality in a distant culture and country, and eventually the return of the prodigal son after a life spent in pursuits thrust upon him. The book's vantage points are the Sikh community and the public, including their conversations

around conversion, rumours, and reform. Judge breaks the linearity of the book by inserting a link to the subaltern that runs through it. The book identifies and connects the Prophetic Maharaja to the subaltern, fleshes out these connections as those without voices, and then shifts their identities across the text: the Sikh community, with its rumors and prophecies, becomes the subaltern in one narration, while Duleep Singh, a royal living in a gilded cage, becomes the subaltern in another. The book repeatedly shows how history constructs positional privilege, all the way from the powerful to the subaltern, thereby shifting one's location within the hierarchy depending on who holds the power.

Judge also writes about two figures who retrace their paths to Duleep Singh: his mother, Maharani Jind Kaur, exiled to Nepal, and his cousin, Thakar Siddenwalia, who partially exiles himself to the French territory of Pondicherry. Both appeal to Duleep Singh with visions of grandeur, lost inheritance, prophecies, and national pride. Judge notes that they seek to reignite in Duleep Singh the yearning for a homeland he may have forgotten. By the 1870s, Duleep Singh was a man adrift in scandalous, bustling London, struggling financially, spiritually, and emotionally. His mother's and cousin's retellings of a glorious past, compounded by present losses, entice him and inspire him to right the colonial wrongs they suffered. Here, Judge effectively and efficiently weaves the ambience of the time and the hopes and aspirations of the Sikh community into the narrative.

Judge recounts, in an almost matter-of-fact tone, the inevitable fallout of managing a volatile *quam* (community), a young religion, a fractured and wealthy region riddled with palace intrigues and mysticism. He introduces rumours and prophecies not as exotic flourishes but as subaltern processes that reflect the loss of religion while whispering possibilities of political and princely revival. Judge takes it forward by actively ratcheting up the arrogance of the colonial powers in labelling the people as uneducated and rustic, before showing how marginalized ideas, simplicity of the community, and their adherence to their *Hukum* (divine order), *Maryada* (code), and *Rehat* (discipline) created such high expectations for a revival of the Khalsa Raj that the Britishers were forced to bar Duleep Singh from entering India after his reconversion to Sikhism.

Though considered simple and ordinary, the Sikh community offered a brilliant yet nuanced performance, aware of what was expected of them when the time came. This quiet and underground rebellion orchestrated by Duleep Singh's cousin Thakar Singh, through the participation of royalty, peasants, religious priests, and provincial governments, was made possible due to the kinship demonstrated by the community. British authorities, fearful of the symbolic and political power Duleep Singh might reclaim and unable to read the inscrutable peasants or the mind games of the subaltern public, exiled him again—this time to Paris. Ironically, the same whispers from the land, floating like a minstrel wind, are what Jind Kaur and Thakar had used to draw Duleep Singh back to his legacy.

Duleep Singh's return to Sikhism, marked by the Amrit ceremony in Aden, must have been a moment of solace for him. However, his journey to reclaim his land and identity never materialised; he was denied the right to return as ruler. His legacy of loss continued. Even if seen as a broken arrow, Judge argues that the arrowhead separated from its shaft does not symbolize failure. It represents a life not allowed to be lived on its own terms and, more powerfully, aligns the future of the faith and community with Duleep Singh's

adherence to Hukum. He becomes a focal point that moves the community forward, replacing the closed-door battles with those fought by the energised Singh Sabhas in the open-air trenches of public opinion. Notably, there is a hidden yet palpable anger in Judge's words.

It comes across in Judge's particular style of constructing his arguments and in his deep, reflective reading of the past that these exercises have often escaped acknowledgment where Sikhs are concerned. The community is considered too rustic, too simple, and too woebegone to claim any intellectual space. They are thought of as only peasant farmers and soldiers, neither thinkers nor strategists. This work places, alongside deep gratitude to the community and its inherent strengths, its never-dying spirit, which comes through vividly and evocatively in this prose. The Sikh community has stood the test of time, and history has acknowledged the inability of monarchs, rulers, governments, and even fringe elements to control it. Yet it still lacks acceptance; it is rendered emotional and unpredictable.

All this adds up to Judge's analysis: even in death, Duleep Singh was denied belonging. He died not in India or England but in Paris, still in exile. His life, from beginning to end, was scripted by loss, a tragic figure manipulated like a puppet by those who held the strings. By placing Duleep Singh as a metaphor for the community, Judge forces us to recognise the deep othering suffered by the Sikh community. While steeped in Sikh history and colonial politics, the book speaks as much to postcolonial scholars, historians of empire, and diasporic readers as it does to the community itself. Judge's meticulous research and presentation of linkages are evident in the way he has illuminated the contradictions in police records and newspaper accounts of Singh Sabha meetings. His analysis reveals a subtle strategy through which the Sikh community navigated and at times exploited the colonial state's policies of creating political and religious divides in the subcontinent, leaving a subtle yet profound impact on perceptions of Sikh resilience against colonial erasure.

However, one cannot help but ask why this book was written in this way. At the very beginning, Judge informs readers that his work deliberately resists conventional narrative forms. While he views this demanding approach as a strength, the book's deeply intellectualised style and layered academic language can test the reader's patience, often requiring multiple readings to grasp its core arguments. This complexity risks distancing even those genuinely interested in the subject. Judge's dense style and focus on Duleep Singh's symbolic role, while purposeful, sometimes overshadows detailed historical evidence that might have provided a more grounded understanding. At times, the book feels less like a work of community memory or historical clarity and more like a self-fulfilling intellectual exercise, an academic monument to Judge's knowledge and sophistication. In doing so, it risks failing to serve the Sikh community that it romanticizes. Its language, structure, and theoretical frameworks seem designed to impress elite scholarly circles, resulting in a dense narrative that lacks chronological coherence and indulges in abstract digressions rooted in Western theorists like Freud and Lacan, rather than in Gurbani, Janamsakhis, or oral traditions that run through the veins of Sikh life. The author repeatedly cites the *Sau Sakhis* and the *Malwa Des Ratan Di Sakhis* as central to creating the "atmosphere of anticipation" surrounding Duleep Singh's return, but does not substantially draw on them to analyze the community, except to assert that they were emotive tools. As a result, the analysis remains primarily rooted in Western frameworks.

To understand the resistance, memory, and soul of the Sikh people, their grounded and rustic charisma, spontaneity, and cultural vitality, akin to the Gauls of old, why did Judge feel the need to use foreign psychoanalytic lenses to the point that the community becomes almost unrecognizable? Had he woven in vernacular sources or community dialogues, the book might have empowered Sikhs to reclaim their history and dignity. Instead, at times, it seems to perpetuate the colonial erasure it seeks to critique, leaving the living, breathing community, still bearing the weight of loss, to long for remembrance, clarity, and a voice it can truly call its own. I read the book through the lens of my Sikh identity and my training, which often encourages simplifying things to get to the heart of the matter. While the book met the twin criteria I set out at the beginning, its inaccessibility to the larger community once again denies us the right to be understood by ourselves.

Still, one cannot stop thinking about this book and, hence, about Duleep Singh. *Prophetic Maharaja* makes him larger than the book itself and larger than a memory, more than the losses he suffered, the sovereignty he lost, the pain he hid, and the expectations he managed. Judge's presentation leaves a haunting impression of the 'prophetic maharaja' on the reader, because it reflects on the many challenges that shaped Duleep Singh's life. Judge's words allow Duleep Singh to become the sum of many things. Perhaps he is exactly what destiny had intended him to be.