

Sarkar, Jadunath. *The Fall of the Mughal Empire (4 Volumes)*. Orient Black Swan.

Why should a student of the English language and literature study this book, some people may ask. It is only a very recent trend that students of English are confined almost solely to books prepared by their teachers and the textbook committees. Careful analysis will show that these new books may have the skeleton of language, but they lack its body and flesh, skin and beauty and vitality, leaving the student confused and impoverished. Language is best learned when it is used for learning something else. That is how Indians learnt English until about the 1970s – some grammar and translation aided by a generous offering of classics.

I can boast of descent in a rather direct line from the late Prof. Sarkar (1870-1958). He taught my father, Govind Chowdhary (1909–2002) Mughal History at Patna College. And like other students of Sarkar, my father always referred to him in any conversation on Medieval India. So I heard several times about the house-arrest of Shivaji in Delhi by Aurangzeb and his escape from there.

A first class B A (Hons.) in English and History and a first class M A in English from Calcutta University, Sarkar was appointed in the Indian Education Service (IES) as a lecturer in English. But following his interest, he later shifted to History. He was a nationalist, like many others of his kind and time, and he made no secret of his support for the freedom movement in India. As a result, the provincial police suspected him of being a “terrorist” and watched his movements. But Sarkar was neither a crony of the British, nor an obscurantist or terrorist. Like most Brahma Samajis, he did not believe in caste, rituals and idol worship. He thought the British Imperial Rule had

been a divine blessing for India. Yet he was proud of India's heritage. In almost the last lines of his four-volume history of *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*, he says, “India was not called upon to plume herself in the borrowed feathers of European civilization; she had only to assimilate modern thought and modern arts into her inner life without any loss of what she had so long possessed” (p. 293). For more about his life and works, we can see the links to some websites on him in the references.

His works were almost invariably fruits of decades of painstaking research in Persian and other contemporary sources. And then there is his art of story-telling – together they place his works in a class of great historical works of wide readership. Ignoring all that their own CID felt, the British conferred knighthood (C(ompanion of the I(ndian) E(mpire)) upon him. He wrote nearly a dozen books, edited two and supervised other miscellaneous works. Principal among his works, *History of Aurangzeb* (5 Vols.) and *The Fall of the Mughal Empire* (4 Vols.) are massive works. They took nearly 50 years to write. But the relentless pursuit of a goal seen here is monumental.

My father had some of his books. I remember the *History of Aurangzeb and Later Mughals*, A-5 size, green, cloth-bound volumes, in my father's revolving book-shelf. But before I was old enough to understand these books and their value, they decayed and disappeared. But not from my mind. Along with two other equally timeless books, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Gibbon, and *The History of English Speaking Peoples* by Winston Churchill, it held its place on my reading list. In February this

year, a kind friend and book-seller brought me the new edition¹ of the four volumes of *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*. This week I read the last page of the last volume.

I will first like to say why these books have interested me. The first and the last, i. e. Gibbon and Sarkar, talk about the decline of mighty empires; and the second, i. e. Churchill, talks about the rise of a nation from obscurity to a superpower. Until about the early centuries of the Christian era, Romans controlled nearly all trade routes of the then known world. Their coins have been found from Patna to Rameshwaram even in India. But by the early centuries of the first Christian millennium, they had shrunk to a medium-size European city presided over by a priest. What went wrong? Ditto for the Mughals. When the British came to India in 1603, their agents had to wait for months to see the then Mughal Emperor. But in 1803, when the then Mughal "Emperor" accepted the British protectorate, his empire had shrunk to the precincts of the Red Fort in Delhi. Actually, not even there, "the authority of the Shah was to be a harmless fiction... he had no revenue, law courts or troops of his own" (Kaye, I, 223, cited in Sarkar, p. 283). He was virtually a British employee, promised a monthly salary of Rs 90,000/-. Actually, he was so inconsequential now that the British Governor-General visiting Delhi in 1808 did not think it worth his while to call on the Emperor. What went wrong?

First, about the Mughals. Beginning with Babar, the first six Mughals truly deserved the epithet of "Great". They were matchless at arms; they were peerless in diplomacy. But after Aurangzeb, there came a

succession of princes who were weak, lazy, vicious and avaricious men of no personality or character. Sarkar says, "Now began a rapid and hopeless decline in the moral character of our ruling rajahs and nawabs. They continued to live as autocrats without the moral justification of being the leaders in war and fathers of clans that the founders of their dynasties had been... The Mughal empire and with it the Maratha overlordship of Hindustan fell because of the rottenness at the core of Indian society..." (p. 288-9). I like many things about the book. But Sarkar's art of storytelling, his analysis of events and personalities, and the narrative power of his English prose render this book in a class where one does not ask if it is a work of history or literature.

In the third battle of Panipat, 1761, Maratha forces of the Peshwa were evenly matched with the Afghan forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali. Marathas had 45,000 horses and 15,000 foot soldiers. They had a mercenary but very loyal Afghan General Ibrahim Ghardi managing their artillery. Abdali, on the other hand, had 50,000 horses and 15,000 foot soldiers. But similarities ended there. Maratha General Bhau had only a couple of years before defeated the massive forces of Nizam and had been handpicked by the Peshwa for this campaign. But he had no one else whose advice he could trust, or on whom he could depend for help. His camp was riddled with jealousy, sabotage, indiscipline, disorganisation, absence of essential commodities, supplies and logistics. His organisation was deficient in other ways too. Whereas Abdali had at least half a dozen generals who were as good as he himself, and who worked as a well-knit

¹ Sarkar, Jadunath (1934/2008) *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Hyderabad (India) : Orient Black Swan, 4 Volumes

team, Bhau had hardly anyone whom he could trust and consult. The results did not take a long time to be known. The blow-by-blow account Sarkar gives of this battle is no less than Sanjaya's commentary on the Mahabharata war.

Sarkar's flair for English language often shows in his personal observations. His similes and metaphors are telling. Regarding efforts for the revival of cottage industries in India, Sarkar says, "...to save our artisan class from starvation by promoting the manufacture and sale of curios and objects of art, for foreign tourists, had exactly the same practical effect as applying a mop to the Atlantic waves rolling on the beach of England..." (p. 287).

With the decline in the royalty came the decline of the masses as well. If the 500 years of India did not produce another Akbar, it did not produce another Tulsidas either. "...the literature now produced... merely pandered to the rich men's pride and vice" (p. 291). European civilization in India gave them an opportunity for both, intellectual improvement and moral decline. Without any notable exception, most people imported only articles of luxury. Not even a lithographic press was imported by any Mughal prince or Nawab (p.294).

Observes Sarkar, "The mere copying of the externals of European civilisation, without undergoing a new birth of the spirit... led only to the growth of the Anglo-Muslim culture of the Oudh Nawab's court, which was a bastard sprout producing no flower or fruit. In it the inner spirit of modern civilisation was wanting; and only the outer trappings of European life were borrowed and put on the persons of Indians who then looked like idiots or buffoons. No modern literature took its birth in the Lucknow royal

court, the pictures and poetry it produced were mostly pornographic; Asaf-ud-daula used to eat sixty-four grains of the strongest Turkish opium every day. His successor, Sadat Ali, knew English and a little French too, but turned out on the throne to be such a drunkard that he had to be assisted to his bed almost every night" (p. 294).

Along with other observers, Sarkar believes that the fall of the Mughal Empire had a "divine dispensation" (p.295). The intellectual vacuum thus created was filled in by the English language and literature the study of which, Sarkar says (p.294), began India's intellectual awakening and renaissance.

By any standard, *The Fall of the Mughal Empire* by Jadunath Sarkar, like the Taj Mahal, *King Lear* or *Monalisa*, is an all time great that must not be missed.

References

Encyclopaedia Britannica: Sir Jadunath Sarkar

For early life and works of Sarkar, see the following sites:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jadunath_Sarkar

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/524365/Sir-Jadunath-Sarkar>

Churchill, Winston S: *The history of English Speaking Peoples...*

Gibbon, John: *Declin and Fall of the Roman Empire...*

Sarkar, Jadunath (1934/2008) *The Fall of the Mughal Empire* (4 Volumes), Hyderabad (India): Orient Black Swan,

Shreesh Chaudhary

Visiting Professor

Department of English

G L A University Mathura

shreeshchaudhary@gmail.com