

'THE LAST NIZAM', HIS LIFE AND TIMES: THROUGH AN AUSTRALIAN'S EYES

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Abstract:

The novel, The Last Nizam is a tale of a king who was born out of union of the two greatest Muslim dynasties of their time. Through an Indian grandmother, he was a descendant of Prophet Mohammed; through a Turkish mother, a descendant of the last Caliph of Turkey. His dynasty was founded in 17th century amidst bloodshed and intrigue under the Mughal emperors and in 1724 became an independent state. Since then the city and the state of Hyderabad had been synonymous with culture, opulence and intrigue.

The Last Nizam by John Zubrzycki, is the story of an extraordinary dynasty, the Nizams of Hyderabad. The work tells how the last Nizam gave up a kingdom for the rugged expanse of outback Australia. The work is a story of the rise of the Nizams to enormous wealth and prominence. It also narrates the tale of a man who left behind the wealth and palaces of Hyderabad to drive bulldozers in the Australian bushes.

Keywords: Nizam, Hyderabad, John Zubrzycki, Australia, Istanbul, Turkey.

The Last Nizam is a non-fictional, biographical work by an Australian journalist John Zubrzycki. Zubrzycki's has been associated with India for twenty-five years as a Hindi student, diplomat, consultant and foreign correspondent. He had immense interest and fascination for the extravagant lifestyle of Indian emperors. During his stay in India, Zubrzycki researched about Mukarram Jah, the last Nizam of Hyderabad; and how the heir to the throne of India's largest princely state found himself running a sheep station in the Australian outback. The work is a great way to go back in time and see what went miserably wrong with a state which was once so wealthy and powerful.

The Last Nizam contains much about the rise of the Nizams to extreme wealth and dissipation under the Mughals and later the British. But the most interesting part of this book is the Australian connection. It adds weight to this account. This paper will try to focus Mukarram Jah's life in Australia.

The Nizam dynasty was founded in 17th century amidst bloodshed and intrigue under the Mughal emperors and later it became an independent state in 1724.

Barkat Ali Khan Mukarram Jah Asaf Jah VIII, is the last living Nizam of Hyderabad. He is an offspring of the union of the two great Muslim dynasties of their time. Through his Indian grandmother, he was a descendant of Prophet Mohammed; and through his Turkish mother, a descendant of the last Caliph of Turkey. He is the son of Azam Jah and Durru Shehvar. He received his preliminary education from Doon School. Later, he was sent to Harrow, Cambridge, London School of Economics and Sandhurst in England.

He inherited the title of the 'Nizam' in 1967, after the death of his grandfather, Osman Ali Khan. A grand ceremony was organized for his 'inauguration' (the day when Mukarram Jah was given the title of Nizam officially) as the 'Nizam'. "While seated, the President of India's two gazettes acknowledging Jah as the successor of the seventh Nizam and declaring him the ruler of Hyderabad and the sole owner of all movable and immovable property of Osman Ali Khan's private estate are read out. From outside the palace come the sounds of a 21-gun salute and shouts of 'Long Live the Nizam' from the tens of thousands of people gathered in the streets." (*The Last Nizam*, 236) Osman Ali Khan was the last ruling Nizam of

Hyderabad but to his utter bad luck, Mukarram was a king without a state. He was given the official title of “His Exalted Highness, the Rustam of the Age, the Aristotle of the Times, Wal Mamuluk, Asaf Jah VIII, the Conqueror of Dominions, the Regulator of the Realm, Nawab Mir Barakat Ali Khan Bahadur, the Victor in Battles, the Leader of Armies, the Nizam of Hyderabad and Berar” by the then President of India.

He was a man caught between his inheritance and the forces of modernization. Everything was in disarray.

“Jah's biggest problem, he quickly realized, were the 14,718 other staff and dependents who, like the old valet, did not want anything to change. In addition to several hundred *khanazads*, 42 concubines and their 100 or so offspring, there were 6000 employees on the books at the Chowmahalla complex alone, 300 bodyguards, 28 people whose only job was to bring drinking water to the Nizam and his immediately family from the traditional well outside the city (long since dried up), and 340 kitchen staff. '[The late Nizam's]' kitchens were feeding 2000 people a day. Every restaurant in the vicinity was being secretly supplied food from my grandfather's kitchens.” (*The Last Nizam*, 233)

Jah had inherited a ridiculously inflated army of retainers and had struggled hard to sort out the mess. He had underestimated the complexity of putting everything in order. He had assumed that it would take about a year to get everything in place. In order to get rid of all the problems of the estate, he was in need of people who were honest and experienced. Things were getting worse every day. Most debilitating was the legal wrangling initiated by the several thousand descendants of the different Nizams, almost all of whom claimed part of Jah's inheritance. Jah's father, who had been passed over in the will, and his aunt, led the legal challenge. Hence, Mukarram Jah decided to send his wife Esra and two children away from the noxious atmosphere of Hyderabad. He too wanted to get away from all these. Eventually, in 1973, disgusted by the weight of litigation and the bitterness of the family in-fighting, Jah relocated to a sheep farm in Perth, Australia. His first visit to Australia was with Hashim Ali Javeri, in March 1972. One afternoon when they stepped out of their room in Transit Inn, they found the streets quiet and deserted as if martial law had been declared. Jah visited the Youanmi Station in old gold-mining country near Mount Magnet. He stood on the back of the ute, stared in amazement and said, “I love this place, miles and miles of open country and not a bloody Indian in sight.” (Zubrzycki 252)

Jah stayed in Australia for ten days, but they were long enough for him to decide that it was the perfect escape from the burdens of Hyderabad estate.

In Australia, Mukarram Jah bought 2, 00,000-hectare property called Murchison House Station, despite the fact that there were tough restrictions on foreigners buying land anywhere in Australia. The station's isolation and its size appealed to him. He immediately fell in love with the outback, with its openness and space as it was as far removed from the incestuous atmosphere of Hyderabad, where his own father was taking him to court. He had a different perspective. To leave his inheritance behind and become an Indian prince in the Australian outback seemed quite natural to him. He once told a reporter, “Abu Bakar (the first Caliph of Turkey who was his ancestor) was a shepherd, so I see no reason why I shouldn't be one.” His wife Ezra was appalled by the informality and isolation of the place; hence she left for London in just nine days. The locals treated and greeted him not with deep bows and salutations of “Your Exalted Highness” but with “How yer doin', Mukarram or Jah?” Some even called him Charlie. Mukarram claimed to have personally graded 300 km of roads and fence lines at Murchison House Station.

There, he donned blue overalls and spent his days under the bonnets of his cars or driving bulldozers. According to John Zubrzycki, “His grandfather composed couplets in Persian about unrequited love. To Jah's ears there was nothing more poetic than the drone of a diesel engine.” (Zubrzycki 213) His over-riding passion was heavy machinery. “I like rebuilding earth moving and heavy industrial equipment like that, I take old bulldozers and strip them down and rebuild them like some other people make motor cars their hobby.” (Zubrzycki 260) On the day of his inauguration as the Nizam, his imported

car V8 had broken down. Amidst all the grandeur, Jah was worried only about the car that had broken down. "Uppermost in Jah's mind at that moment, he would later admit, was not the significance of the ceremony or what he would do with his grandfather's wealth, but why the imported V8 was refusing to start." (Zubrzycki 237)

Though, Jah had lived in villas, palaces and expensive hotel suites for most of his life, in the initial years at Murchison House Station, he lived in the manager's cottage whose walls had peeling paint and floors with cracked linoleum tiles. But he cared little for the discomfort. He was mostly outdoors, driving his bulldozers into the desert. He shunned the limelight and even turned down the invitations for breakfasts with the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. In an interview given to 'The West Australia' he said, "I just want to be left alone, I don't need the publicity. I know I am the Nizam of Hyderabad and that's all that matters." (Zubrzycki 273) He once said to his employee David Michael, "I'm not trying to make money. Why should I? I want a nice quiet life and a chance to work with my hands and get them dirty." (Zubrzycki 272) While he lived in Australia, the plunder of his properties and possessions in India was reaching epidemic proportions. Most of the valuables he left behind in India were sold off by the mid-1970s by his managers, cronies and family members. Projects on his Australian property were abandoned midstream, managers were regularly replaced. Mukarram would drive across Australia and then charter a Lear jet to get home. Murchison was strewn with abandoned graders, tractors and cars.

While in Australia, Jah fell in love with a secretary named Helen Simmons who was working as a secretary to a property developer and architect, Goldberg. It was love at first 'bite' (as it was a blind dinner date set by Goldberg). She once said in an interview to the 'Express', "It is a part of Kismet, fate, predestination, fortunate coincidences in which I believe." (Zubrzycki 275) However, she was always worried that the person she was in love with was still married to Esra. Perth's gossip columns were full of articles about their love affair. They wrote that the secretary had fallen in love with an Indian prince because he was the fabulously wealthy heir to a dynasty that stretched back to the Mughal Empire. Their parents were also against this alliance. Esra also said that the relationship would bring disrepute on the family. Helen rebelled against her family, converted to Islam and married Jah in 1979 in a Muslim ceremony.

She adapted herself to the Muslim way of life and learnt to cook Hyderabadi cuisine. She filled her mansion with antiques shipped from Jah's palaces in Hyderabad. The Havelock House began to resemble Hyderabad in its gaudy and ostentatious heyday. Everything had an Indian effect, the food the cutlery sets, cut glasses, chandeliers, Indian lanterns etc. The drapes were copies of the ones that hung in Falaknuma Palace in Hyderabad. A visitor had once remarked, "It would take days to really appreciate and understand the splendor." (Zubrzycki 277) Jah also took Helen on the pilgrimage to Mecca and said, "I was hoping she would be the first Australian woman to go on the Haj, but then I found out that an Afghan had married an Australian and brought her to Mecca in the early 1900s." (Zubrzycki, 278) She had also visited Hyderabad with Jah and was staggered to see hundreds of thousands of people filling the courtyard of the Mecca Masjid and the streets outside, to hear him speak.

But it was not long enough when Helen found the strict segregation of princely life oppressing. For her, this was the hardest thing of all. When she returned to Perth, she realized that her excitement of being the wife of an Indian prince, who loved a life of seclusion, began to cease with time. She felt trapped between the responsibilities of being a mother and an absent and aloof husband. She also realized that she had given up her social life for the love of Mukarram Jah. Then she decided to socialize even if Jah would not. This became the cause of the problems in their relationship. She desired an independent life but Jah wanted her to behave like a good Muslim wife. He also did not like her to have men as friends. Incidentally, Helen met Peter Forbes, a homosexual. Being a homosexual, Jah did not object of hiring him as Helen's driver. Gradually, she fell in love with Forbes and finally decided to get divorce from Jah and filed a case which lingered on till her death. Jah commented on their soured relationship:

“We wanted different things from life and gradually we tended to follow different paths. I wanted to escape the so-called glamorous life. I had taken my fill of lavish parties and shared little in common with the glitterati of Perth's money society... Helen, on the other hand, was happy in this environment. She loved the constant parties, the attention and I suppose the escape these things gave her.” (Zubrzycki 283)

On 17 May 1989, Helen died of AIDS in Royal Perth Hospital. The newspapers milked this story as much as they could. The intimate details of Jah's failed marriage splashed across the front pages of the tabloid press. The affair of Helen, her death and the media left Jah shocked and confused and finally he left Perth in late May 1989. He was uncertain about his future in Australia and was also not willing to go back to Hyderabad. So, he left for Turkey to plan for his future life. He now lives as a recluse with his fifth wife Princess Orchedi, in a small flat in Istanbul. In an interview given to journalist of 'The West Australian', he once said, “I'm not supposed to have financial problems... I'm supposed to have good advisors.” (Zubrzycki, 291-292)

In an interview given to Manish Chand, Zubrzycki commented about his book *The Last Nizam*. According to him the book is a story, tailor made for an Australian and Indian audience. He had inherited his grandfather's wealth-one of the wealthiest man in the world. But rather than stay in India and manage the estate, he spent a very little time in India as he did not feel very comfortable in India, with all that pressure from aggrieved relatives and Indian tax officials. Then, Indira Gandhi abolished the Privy Purse. He wanted to get away from it all.” The Nizam was very upset with all that was going in India and in his family. So he never wanted to stay here. He left all the luxuries of a palace o live in peace in an apartment in Istanbul. He still lives there in anonymity with his fifth wife. Once the richest inheritor now lives in isolation.

Zubrzycki has very meticulously drawn a vivid picture of the Nizam in his work. He covers the dark and the bright aspects of his life. He has beautifully presented the fall of a Nizam, once considered to be the richest in the world.

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