
THE EMERALD CITY AND THE RED FORT

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I read two books recently: *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* by Rajiv Chandrasekeran recounts experiences of the administration of Paul Bremer and the occupying forces in the Green Zone; and *The Last Mughal: the Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857*, by William Dalrymple, on the extraordinary story of the last Mughal emperor of India – Bahadur Shah Zafar – in the Red Fort. The disgusting and disturbing spectacle of Saddam Hussein's hanging and my chief editor Abbas Raza's constant pressure to name my favourite books of 2006 got me thinking about the curious coincidence that two among them link imperialism and evangelism, and recount the remaking of other societies.

Comparisons are odious, particularly between the tolerant, gentle and cultivated head of a great dying dynasty and the unsophisticated evangelical representatives of a declining superpower, although both were cocooned in their respective courts. The last Mughal built his own world of poetry, music, hunting, dancing and partying in the Red Fort. The Americans built theirs of BBQs, movie theatres, trailers, press conferences, bars and discos in the Emerald City.

Shah Zafar, a poet who understood his condition as a virtual prisoner of the British living out the end of a dynasty, wrote:

“Who ever enters this gloomy palace, Remains a prisoner for life in European captivity.”

Although an expert marksman, Zafar was no warrior. He patronized the poets, musicians and intellectuals of Delhi, and focused his energy and effort on the intellectual and cultural life of the city. He was tolerant towards all faiths: refusing to bow to the conservative imam's demand to change his doctor who converted to Christianity and wary of Muslims who insisted on converting Hindus or slaughtering cows to fulfill Islamic obligations. On non-religious occasions, Shah Zafar is known to have refrained from entering mosques, since he also could not enter temples. He was not very adroit at managing his complex and cumbersome harem of many wives and concubines. His “harem was notoriously lax as far as discipline and security were concerned.” And the

punishments he meted to his concubines who crossed the line were lenient, if administered at all.

The mutiny of 1857 took not just the British but also Shah Zafar by surprise. The Indian troops – Muslim and Hindu – rallied around him as the rightful ruler of India with the political objective of restoring the Mughal Empire. The pious old (he was 82 years at the time) Sufi poet Shah Zafar suddenly became the reluctant head of a rebel army that rallied to Delhi as the last seat of Mughal sovereignty. He vacillated, not because he was timorous or weak, but because he was torn among knowledge of imminent failure and duty towards the troops rebelling in his name, and a desire to protect his subjects, the Delhi dwellers caught in between two contending armies.

The rebellion had powerful religious overtones to it. The divide was as much between British rulers and Indians ruled, as Christian versus Hindu and Muslim. The rebellion struck a chord, because it was responding to an imperial shift away from a religiously tolerant, even assimilationist, form of British rule, to one that combined Christian evangelism with British power. British agents, who had once taken on Indian wives and ways, and even Muslim religion and Hindu rituals, refraining from eating pork and beef, now felt that they were there to remake native societies in their own image. The rebels spared Muslim Englishmen (yes, there were some in Delhi) but not Christian Indians. There were atrocities committed against English men and women trapped in Delhi. But all of this paled in comparison with British reprisals after the rebellion collapsed. British soldiers committed mass murder, rape and the wholesale destruction of one of the world's most beautiful cities. Palaces, mosques and madrasas were destroyed in a misguided effort to punish a city for the rebellion.

Shah Zafar was exiled to Rangoon shortly afterwards, and died there in 1862 at the age of 87. He led a sad and humiliating exile. And his chief wife and surviving sons were not allowed to return to India under British rule. Today, Shah Zafar's burial place is, fittingly for a man who loved poetry and was both religious and tolerant, a Sufi shrine where Muslims in Burma come to worship.

Imperial Life in the Emerald City describes a very different form of isolation—rulers choosing to set themselves apart from the ruled by building a bubble around themselves. The members of the occupying authority ate pork (served by Muslim workers), drank alcohol and touched not a morsel of food grown in Iraq within the green zone. The only contact with Iraqis were those who worked under them, and were therefore hesitant to criticize them, and Iraqi politicians dependent on the occupying authority for their power.

The rulers in the green zone demonstrated a remarkable lack of curiosity and interest in Iraqi history and politics. They believed that they had correctly conceived the new Iraq. And all that was required to execute this conception was the right combination of men, guns, dollars and cement. In their evangelizing zeal, they believed that Iraqi politicians and American soldiers who raised questions about how exactly to execute this conception of Iraq, or needing more men and dollars, were inadequate to the task at hand. As the going got tougher, the plans got fancier.

Efforts were made to privatize state industries running at a loss, lay off workers and secure foreign investors, at precisely the time when unemployment was the biggest challenge facing Iraqis, and no foreigners could travel to Baghdad to view their potential investments, let alone try to turn them around. Other plans that would have had a far-reaching impact on ordinary Iraqis included taking away rations of food in exchange for cash, at a time when transporting goods to the market, not the money to pay for them, was the key issue. More fanciful plans included giving debit cards to families to pay for food in a country where phone lines did not work because of regular losses of electrical power.

My favourite is the plan to have a state-of-the-art stock market, with the fanciest computers and the most squeaky clean transparency regulations to ensure that Iraq's stock market would be up and running, when all the Iraqis wanted was a large room with dry-erase boards. The young American advisor spent months and hundreds of thousands trying to get the stock market off the ground with his grandiose plans. Two days after he left Baghdad, the new Iraqi stock market opened successfully with white boards to write bids and chits of paper to note transactions. The American advisor expressed frustration at the lack of Iraqi cooperation. Still, he felt that if he had not done his job, maybe nothing would have happened at all. When asked what would have happened in the absence of the young American advisor, the Iraqi Chairman of the Stock Exchange responded that they would have opened months earlier. At precisely the moment when no American civilian members of the occupying authority could travel outside the green zone, the planning for the wholesale economic reconstruction of Iraq got more and more ambitious.

Like Shah Zafar who wrote his beautiful poetry and encouraged his court musicians to sing and intellectuals to write, because he knew he had no power outside the Red Fort, the rulers in the Emerald City were encouraged to formulate plans and promulgate laws they need not ever worry about implementing. But unlike Zafar in the Red Fort, these officials of the occupying authority were out of touch with reality. Zafar was a sad old man, who wrote poetry because he knew he had no power to do anything else. By contrast, the new rulers in Iraq were strutting around the Emerald City, spending more and more time drawing up grander and grander plans, without realizing that they were doing so at precisely the moment when they no longer had the ability or power to implement them. ■

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