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Mapping the North-West Frontier: Travels, Diplomacy and Legacy of Mohan Lal Kashmiri

Alaknanda Mahajan



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About the Author:

Ms. Alaknanda Mahajan is a Ph.D. scholar at the Department of History, University of Jammu. Her research interests encompass colonial cartography, border making, British policies in the North-West frontier and the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. She can be reached at alakmahajan26@gmail.com.

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Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh - 201314
INDIA
Ph: +91 120 7170100
E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in
Website: <https://chs.snu.edu.in>

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Abstract

The Research Paper is an attempt to revisit the remarkable life and enduring legacy of Mohan Lal Kashmiri who was arguably the first Indian explorer of the Great Game. The paper seeks to analyze his multifaceted contributions in the fields of geographical exploration, travel writing, diplomacy and espionage. He rose to prominence due to his linguistic prowess and began his journey as a Persian munshi under Alexander Burnes but ultimately proved himself far more valuable than just a scribe. Travelling at a time when Afghanistan had become a chessboard of empires and the shadow of the Great Game was lengthening, he displayed great deftness and dexterity in adopting different identities and bridging the political, cultural and intellectual divides during the first half of the 19th century. He was a pioneer in the exploration of the North-West frontier and his noteworthy contributions paved the way for a host of Indian spies and explorers who came to be known as the 'Pundits'. Mohan Lal's travelogues provide the reader with historical and cultural insights of regions which were caught at the crossroads of empires. By blending his personal experiences and observations along with strategic analysis, he cemented his reputation as an author. His literary works subtly challenged the predominantly Eurocentric narrative of the Great Game by offering an Indian perspective about the events which were unfolding. Mohan Lal was instrumental in obtaining crucial intelligence that helped the British army storm the Ghazni fort and also in orchestrating the assassinations of key Afghan tribal leaders. He acted as a mediator between the British officials and Afghan rebels attempting to broker peace amidst rising tensions. However, despite all his efforts he was sidelined by the colonial government after the Afghan debacle. Dejected, disillusioned and debt-ridden he spent the later years of life in obscurity. His contributions were gradually forgotten and reduced to minor footnotes in history. The research paper is thus an attempt to rectify this and highlight his accomplishments. In the words of Mohan Lal's Biographer Hari Ram Gupta - "Mohan Lal's life does not challenge the attention of the world, but modestly solicits it".

Keywords: Great Game; Anglo-Afghan war; espionage; North-West Frontier

Note on Methodology

Drawing on extensive primary and secondary sources, the following paper delves into the extraordinary life Mohan Lal Kashmiri, arguably the first Indian explorer of the Great Game - a life which deserves due recognition in historical scholarship. While writing this research paper a thorough study was done of all the relevant archival material, his own writings as well as contemporary accounts. An examination of his life and a comprehensive reading of his travel accounts was instrumental in highlighting several facets of his personality. By adopting a multi-disciplinary approach, a textual analysis was done of Mohan Lal's writings in order to have a deeper insight into his intellectual thought process and the inherent biases prevalent in his work. A comparative evaluation was also done with Burnes' account to highlight Mohan Lal's unique perspective as an Indian traveler and intermediary. Apart from this, a thorough study was carried out also of existing scholarship and modern works focusing on themes of the Great Game, colonial knowledge acquisition, and the Anglo-Afghan war among other subjects.

Hari Ram Gupta's biography of Mohan Lal titled *Life and Work of Mohan Lal Kashmiri 1812-1877* published in the year 1943 remains the most authoritative and exhaustive work on the subject, chronicling his early life, education, journeys undertaken with Burnes, legacy as a diplomat and his later life. This biography has acted as foundational work for all the later scholarship about Mohan Lal. A modern work which highlights his intelligence efforts during the Anglo-Afghan war is *Afghan Frontier: At the Crossroads of Conflict* (2003) by Victoria Schofield. The book revisits the Great Game and situates him as a key intermediary whose skills provided the colonial government with a decisive edge in battle. Ultimately, however, Mohan Lal's services remained underappreciated after the war was over. His life, thus, raises pertinent questions about the crucial and complex role played by Indians in the colonial edifice of power. An article titled, "*The Chameleonic identities of Mohan Lal Kashmiri and His Travels in Persianate Lands*" (2018), written by Sunil Sharma offers a nuanced view of the several actual and potential identities adopted by Mohan Lal during the course of his Central Asian sojourn. The author refers to Mohan Lal's travelogues as 'autoethnographic accounts of his transformation from a traditional Persian munshi to a westernized colonial subject.' and raises pertinent questions about the stylistic differences between the two editions of his journal.

Another important work titled *Counterflows to Colonialism* (2004) by Michael Fisher elaborates on the experiences of Indian travelers in Britain. This work discusses in detail Mohan Lal's European travels and how he was arguably the first Indian to be photographed. Fischer also discusses how Mohan Lal navigated different religious identities throughout his life but in the end was disenchanted with all of them. Other works such as William Dalrymple's *Return of a King* (2012) highlight his key role in building a reliable network of spies and informants in Kabul and then leveraging it for the advantage of the British. The book elaborates how Mohan Lal issued timely warnings to his superiors regarding the impending danger but all these fell on deaf ears and he had no choice but to witness the disaster that befell them. Recent works like *Taming the Imperial Imagination* (2016) by Martin. J. Bayly and *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (2008) by B.D. Hopkins subtly challenge the hegemony of the Great Game narrative in the history of Afghanistan. They argue that the colonial understanding of the Afghan society and politics was deeply flawed and tainted by their own bias. The officials who visited the lands beyond the Khyber Pass constructed their own understanding of the Afghans based on their personal experiences and observation. These officials did not produce a single cohesive narrative of the Afghan political order, but rather produced multiple competing ones which vied for the attention of decision-makers. Thus, the colonial state's power over these areas was fleeting and ephemeral. Other scholarly works consulted during the course of research include *Empire and Information* (1997) by C.A. Bayly, *Mapping the Great Game* (2020) by Riaz Dean and *History of the War in Afghanistan* (1851) by John Kaye among others.

In this essay, an effort has also been made to contextualize Mohan Lal's own writings within contemporary literature. Modern scholars argue that the British empire's expansion into India and its surrounding lands was not simply an act of territorial acquisition but rather a systematic process of defining and controlling space. Scholars of modern India like Bernard Cohn and C.A. Bayly have recognized the fact that colonial power was deeply interlinked with colonial knowledge. Cohn in his essay "The Command of Language and the Language of Command" writes that, "The conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge" (Cohn 1996: 16). The British in coming to India conquered not just territory but the epistemological space as well. They created a repository of knowledge using scientific and revenue surveys, archaeological finds, geographical exploration, collection of antiquities, census etc. which were used as devices for exercising colonial power. Indigenous knowledge was collected and then transformed into an instrument of colonial rule. This knowledge not only provided them with a decisive edge in

military contests but also formed the basis of their understanding of politics, economy and culture of the Indigenous people.

However, it was in the areas where this information could not succeed fully namely the frontier regions such as the North West Frontier of the empire that the British faced maximum difficulties and the colonial rule was at its most vulnerable. They deputed individuals like Mohan Lal to travel and gather information, allowing the British to penetrate areas where European presence might arouse suspicion. Mohan Lal's travels highlight the natural fluidity and permeability of pre-colonial frontiers which were characterized by dynamic cultural exchanges and free movement of men and material for centuries. However, the advent of the British completely changed this scenario. Desirous of imposing fixed lines of sovereignty and driven by strategic and commercial concerns, the colonial government not only redrew the map but also reshaped identities thus sowing the seeds of contentions whose repercussions can be felt even today in Central and South Asia.

The colonial encounter with Afghan society reveals a total lack of knowledge of the land and its people. Mohan Lal's works provide an invaluable indigenous lens to examine the complexities of colonial powers engagement with the local population. He illustrates how the arrogance, cultural insensitivity, moral transgressions and a complete failure in understanding the tribal dynamics led to the disastrous outcomes of the First Afghan War (1839-1842). This clearly demonstrates that the failure of British policy in the region cannot be solely attributed to any external threat but also stemmed from their own misinformation and inability to understand the local socio-cultural dynamics of the region. Mohan Lal's perspective underscores the cultural frictions caused by colonial power.

Mapping the North-West Frontier: Travels, Diplomacy and Legacy of Mohan Lal Kashmiri.

“Now I shall go far and far into the North, playing the Great Game”

- Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*

In the early decades of the 19th century when British and Tsarist empires were vying for commercial and political supremacy in Central Asia, commonly known as the Great Game, a young man was chosen by Alexander Burnes, to accompany him in undertaking a perilous journey across North-West India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Persia. The aim of this mission was to gauge the current political situation in the lands that separated the British and Russian empires. This young man aged 19 at that time was handpicked for this covert mission due to his knowledge of the Persianate court culture and language along with an Anglicized education. His felicity with languages, intellectual bent of mind and resourcefulness in difficult situations made him a valuable asset to his colonial employers. During the course of his travels, he effortlessly donned different masks, adopted various identities and pseudonyms which were appropriately malleable for his missions. He emerged as one of the few heroes of the otherwise disastrous First Anglo-Afghan war. He reveled in the attention and fame that travel brought him. Mirza Abbas, the Prince of Iran knighted him with the Persian order of the Lion and the Sun. Emperor of Afghanistan, Shah Shuja conferred on him the Order of the Durrani Empire, Maharaja Ranjit Singh presented him with a robe of honor and the Mughal emperor Muhammed Akbar Shah also conferred upon him a ‘khilat’, tying with his own hands some jewels on his turban. During his travels in Britain, he received an audience with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert; while the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV along with his queen entertained him at a dinner. But all these accolades did not last long. The later years of his life were shrouded in obscurity and financial troubles. His contributions were slowly forgotten and reduced to minor footnotes in history.

Such was the remarkable life of Mohan Lal Kashmiri, arguably the first Indian explorer of the Great Game. His family belonging to the Zutshi clan of Kashmiri Pandits had migrated to Delhi, the exact date of which is unknown, and were living at Sita Ram Bazar when Mohan Lal was born in the year 1812. The family for generations had served in the Mughal administration, often as Persian munshis. His great grandfather Raja Mani Ram Zutshi was one of the most affluent Pandits at the court of Shah Alam. The total revenue of his estate amounted to approximately Rs.14,000 annually (Gupta 1943: 2; Lal 1834). But within two generations the family suffered a reversal of fortunes and most of their villages and estates were either seized or sold to reduce the family debt. In such a state of monetary crisis, Mohan Lal’s father, Rai Brahm Nath (also known as Budh Singh) sought employment with the British. The family which for generations had served in the Mughal administration had now shifted their allegiance to the British.

Budh Singh accompanied the Elphinstone mission to Peshawar in 1808-09 in the capacity of a Munshi or Persian secretary. He retired from service in 1809, and the family soon relapsed into poor financial conditions. It was in 1812, when Singh was still navigating economic struggles that his son Ram Nath later known as Mohan Lal was born. From a young age Mohan Lal was acutely aware of his family’s faded fortunes and referred to his early years as ‘unpleasant’ and ‘unlucky’ due to their lack of finances (Lal 1834).ⁱ He was born and raised in Delhi at a time when the city was in a transition between the diminishing authority of the Mughal empire and the ever-expanding domination of the British East India Company. The Mughal courtly culture and Persian language were witnessing their twilight and colonial influence along with the

importance of English language were on the ascendancy. It is in this politically charged atmosphere, when the winds of change were blowing, Mohan Lal began his career.

Having served the British, Mohan Lal's father realized the importance of English education in opening new career avenues for young men (C.E. Trevelyan in Lal 1834) and enrolled him at the Delhi English College in 1828. This event was to change the course of his life and allow him to witness history through his own eyes. Although, his early student days were not spent happily (Lal 1834)ⁱⁱ as his family misfortunes weighed on his mind, it was here at the Delhi College that he came into contact with many individuals who shaped his life; it is through their connections that his fortunes began to take an upward turn. During his years at the college, he formed a close bond with C. E. Trevelyan, a member of the managing committee. He found in him, a lifelong mentor and friend. In the introductory pages of his journal, he conveyed his heartfelt gratitude to Trevelyan for his support and encouragement during difficult days. He also received guidance from the great orientalist, James Princep who taught him how to 'take sketches', a skill which every traveler ought to know (Lal 1834: v).

Mohan Lal excelled at school, leaving a mark on all those he met. His genial disposition, natural charm and amicable personality impressed all those whom he came in contact with. He became one of the few Indians of his time to receive a Western education, graduating from Delhi College, which exposed him to British culture and modern ideas. Meanwhile he had already perfected his knowledge of Persian and Urdu as he "moved freely between the domestic worlds of his Brahmin biological mother and his Muslim step mother, learning the languages and values inherent in each household" (Fischer 2006: 240). His fluency in several languages along with an extensive knowledge of the Persianate world and geopolitics made him an asset to the British. His early career began as an assistant teacher but life took a dramatic turn after a chance meeting with Alexander Burnes in 1831.

Alexander Burnes, a young Scotsman, had come to India at the age of 16 and had joined the East India Company ranks. In 1830-31, Burnes aged twenty-five had already led a successful delegation to the Lahore Durbar, mapping and surveying the River Indus along the way. Due to the successful completion of this mission, Burnes had been selected to lead another mission to Bukhara in Central Asia by way of Punjab and Afghanistan. On meeting Mohan Lal and getting to know about his qualifications, Burnes offered him a proposal to join his travels. Following the footsteps of his father, Mohan Lal joined colonial service and accompanied Burnes in this journey. He was appointed as a Persian secretary to Burnes on an annual salary of thousand rupees. For the next few years, he lived a life full of action, adventure and intrigue.

Shadow of the Great Game

During this period, the British were trying to extend their diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan in order to counter the growing Russian presence in Central Asia. The struggle for power and political supremacy in Central Asia which took place between Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia in the 19th century came to be known as The Great Game. It was a British officer named Arthur Conolly who first coined the term but it was later immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his famous work *Kim*. Great game ideology retained its primacy in colonial historiographic trends for a long time. However, recent works have challenged this notion. Critics argue that an overt emphasis on the Great Game has overshadowed the indigenous historiography of the region relegating it to a secondary position. The fear of Russian expansion, whether real or perceived, along with the desire for knowledge of these hitherto uncharted territories and an incentive

for expansion of trade provided the impetus for many diplomatic missions and a host of British explorers and diplomats to make their way through these territories during this period.

Burnes' mission to Bukhara was one such example. Governor-General Lord William Bentinck was of the opinion "that knowledge of the general condition of the countries through which Burnes was to travel, would be useful to the British government" (Burnes 1834: x). Considering the hostility of the tribes towards foreigners and the remoteness of the terrains through which the mission was to pass, Burnes was instructed to pose as a private individual, a captain in the British army returning to Europe overland. For his safety he was provided with passports in Persian, English and French. Accompanying him in this hazardous enterprise along with Mohan Lal was Dr. Gerard, a Surgeon of the Bengal army and Muhammad Ali, a native surveyor.

Travels

Mohan Lal accompanied the exploratory expedition led by Burnes, to the lands North-West of colonial India. The mission was undertaken with the aim to explore and map Central Asia, ostensibly for commercial purposes but with clear geopolitical undertones and to gauge the political condition in the lands beyond the North-West frontier of British India. Their journey took them through Punjab, Afghanistan, and beyond, gathering vital political and military intelligence. They began their journey on 3 January 1832 from Ludhiana, the Northernmost outpost of British India. Travelling through Punjab, at the height of its power under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Mohan Lal marveled at the opulence of his court. He described how the pavilions were adorned with Kashmiri shawls decorated with the finest embroidery and compared the tent in which the Maharaja held his durbar to that of an angel and not a mere mortal (Lal 1834: 10, 14).

While passing through Punjab they encamped at a village named Manikyala, where a hoard of Greek coins had been previously discovered by General Ventura, an officer in the service of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh (Lal 1834: 29). Later, Mohan Lal published a monograph on these Greek antiquities which the mission had stumbled upon. This helped in furthering the understanding of Greco-Bactrian period of Afghan History.

Upon reaching Rawalpindi, they left behind the hospitality and relative safety of the Lahore Durbar and prepared themselves for travels in the turbulent Afghan lands where caravans often faced the dangers of plunder and death. The party reduced their baggage and put on Afghan attire, pretending to be Durrani. It was here that they adopted pseudonyms. Burnes changed his name to *Sikandar Khan* and Mohan Lal was called *Hasan Jan* (Lal 1834: 29). The party travelled extensively through Afghanistan and the Central Asian cities of Bukhara, Balkh, Herat and beyond, gathering information about the prevailing political situation, tribal alliances, and trade routes.

Mohan Lal's journal is replete with rhapsodic description of cities, mainly their topography, climate, architecture and trade, in a style reminiscent of classical Persian literary texts. Passing through Kabul, he gave a detailed description of the bazars which reminded him of his native Delhi and evoked in him a nostalgic feeling for his past. While in Kabul, he also visited the tomb of Mughal Emperor Babur. He was enamored by it and wrote, "I stood without motion, meditating whether I was dreaming of paradise, or roving into an unknown region" (Lal 1834: 65). His narrative was interspersed with the Persian text of two inscriptions - one from the marble mosque built by Shah Jahan in the same complex and the second written on the tomb itself. However, all the Persian inscriptions and verses were absent from the second volume of

his travelogues which was clearly published keeping in mind a more European audience (Sharma 2018: 92).

The next noteworthy stop during their journey was a visit to Bamian. He described the large statues, cut out of solid rocks, and erroneously linked them to the Mahabharata claiming that the Pandavas stayed in Bamian during their exile and built these statutes (Lal 1834: 75-77). During his travels Mohan Lal also wrote six short pieces in the form of Ethno-Archeological reports which were published in the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Some of these reports included 'Brief Description of Herat', 'Description of Uch-Sharif', and 'Brief account of the origin of the Daud Putras' among others.

On rare occasions Mohan Lal gave the reader a few glimpses into the difficulties which beset him while navigating such desolate and hostile terrains. Travelling through the desert in scorching heat, the party often faced shortage of food and water. The severity of heat and shortage of drinking water were such that he suffered from physical exhaustion, excessive thirst, parched mouth and on one occasion lost a quantity of blood through his nose. Despite the challenging situations that he faced, his zeal and enthusiasm to travel and see the novelties of different parts of the world remained undeterred. When Dr. Macneil, the assistant envoy to Tehran, asked him whether he preferred travelling or stopping at his native place, Mohan Lal replied,

“The people who have slept on the bare and pebbly ground, in the journey, dislike the soft beds of their home. Those who have tasted dry bread in travelling, hate the milk-pudding of the country. The human breast, which is touched by sensibility, ardently embraces the good company of travelers and shuns domestic society” (Lal 1834: 175).

Furthermore, he also expressed his wish to travel through Kashmir to Ladakh, Kashghar, Badakhshan and Khiva.

Mohan Lal's fluency in Persian, the lingua franca of culture and diplomacy in Central Asia at that time, and the ability to blend into the local populace enabled him to access conversations which were unreachable to the British and explore areas which were hitherto considered as *terra incognita*. His observations provided the colonial government with a detailed understanding of the region. While on the road he disguised himself in local attire, assumed different identities during the course of his missions and adopted pseudonyms like 'Agha Hasan Jan' and 'Mirza Kuli Kashmiri'.

Throughout his travels, Mohan Lal purposely remained vague about his religious identity and never really adhered to one religion. During an encounter with Reverend J. Wolff, he mentioned that his “religion discarded all idols and consisted in the worship of one sole Supreme Being” (Lal 1834: 60). Similarly, when Qajar crown Prince Abbas Mirza questioned him whether he was a Shia or Sunni, he replied that he was a friend of Panjtan or five persons (Lal 1834: 197). In the beginning of his journey, he was quite vocal in his condemnation of religious bigotry, prejudices and superstitions of both Hindus and Muslims. C.A. Bayly remarked that “Mohan Lal's journeys became a Voltairean tour of the absurdities of Pagan religion” (Bayly 1996: 232). But later in life, he showed a definite tilt towards Shiism.

Towards the end of their journey Burnes and Mohan Lal parted ways in Iran, with the former going towards the Caspian region on his way to Europe while the latter returned to India. Mohan

Lal's linguistic skills, cultural adaptability and youthful energy had made him indispensable to Burnes. Burnes would describe him as,

“the Hindoo lad from Delhi, who exhibited a buoyancy of spirit and interest in the undertaking most rare in an Indian. At my request he kept a minute journal of events; and I venture to believe, if hereafter published, that it will arrest and deserve attention” (Burnes 1834: 347).

On successful completion of the mission, Burnes published his report in 1834 in the form of a three-volume book titled, *Travels into Bokhara, being an account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia*. The book became an instant success and earned him the highest accolades. After his return from Central Asia, Mohan Lal also published a journal of his tour in 1834 titled, *Journal of a Tour Through the Panjáb, Afghánistan, Túrkestán, Khorásán and Part of Persia in Company with Lieut. Burnes and Dr. Gerard*. This work was re-published 12 years later with the addition of his travels in Europe. Later, he also published a biography of Dost Mohammad Khan, the Amir of Kabul, in two volumes which he dedicated to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

In addition to regaling the reader with stories of his travels and adventures, Mohan Lal's journals also reflect a man caught between cultures, between the conflicting currents of his Anglicized English education and his inheritance of the Mughal court culture. While he tried to blend in with his colonial Masters, “in the end, he was neither on terms of equality with the society of European gentlemen, nor with his own community” (Sender 1988: 86). The Pandit community accused him of breaking caste rules during the course of his travels in Central Asia and ostracized him. Deeply saddened by this he tried to seek help from the Government stating, “that this kind of usage will not only hurt the feelings of my old parents and mortify their heart, but disgrace me before my equals” (Gupta 1943: 66). But the colonial government refused to intervene in the matter.

The Afghan Debacle

After his return from Central Asia, Mohan Lal received training in practical surveying at the Hindu College in Calcutta. He was appointed as the British news writer in Khorasan on the recommendation of Captain Wade for which he received a monthly salary of Rs. 250.

Meanwhile, the clouds of uncertainty were gathering in Afghanistan. It was a theater of war where British paranoia about the security of their Indian empire and Russian ambition collided spectacularly. The direct involvement of British authorities in Afghanistan began in the year 1809 when they dispatched a mission to the court of Shah Shuja. The leader of this mission, Mountstuart Elphinstone produced a detailed book entitled, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* which went on to become the foundational work for all the future engagements with Afghanistan. In the following decades, the area became an important arena of the Great Game as it was the gateway to India, controlling the major passes leading towards the country. Also, the colonial government was keen on expanding its commercial footprint in Afghanistan and Central Asia by turning the river Indus into a highway of commerce. Post-colonial critics raise questions about the preeminence of the Great Game narrative and argue that despite the specter of danger created by the colonial authorities in India, East India Company Records only mention a handful of suspected Russians in Afghanistan prior to the 1839 (Hopkins 2008: 45). As a result, the Russians remained a potential rather than an actual threat.

Although no direct military confrontation took place between colonial India and Russia, mutual suspicion was at an all-time high. In 1836, Burnes was dispatched on his second mission to Kabul accompanied by Mohan Lal. Due to his charm, tact and nuanced understanding of Afghan society and politics the latter was appointed as a Political Assistant to Burnes. Driven by fears of Russian expansion and the desire to safeguard the security of the North-West frontier of British India, British authorities in India wished to establish their diplomatic stronghold over the area.

The arrival of a Russian envoy Ivan Vitkevich at the court of Dost Mohammad and the possibility that the Amir might turn towards Russia for support sounded alarm bells for the colonial government. Amir Dost Mohammad Khan was not a passive spectator of events unfolding around him. Rather, he skillfully maneuvered and pitted one power against the other. Thus, exploiting their rivalry to maintain some degree of autonomy. He demanded support from the British to win back Peshawar from Maharaja Ranjit Singh while also keeping his communication open with the Russians and Persians. Meanwhile, the Russian envoy directly warned Mohan Lal that 50,000 Russian soldiers who were in readiness to land in Astrabad, and with the help of local chiefs would then march into Punjab. Such a movement would rouse the discontented chiefs of India to rebel against the British (Lal 1846b: 309).

Sensing the imminent danger, Governor-General Lord Auckland wished to install a more pliant ruler on the Afghan throne. A regime change was orchestrated and Shah Shuja was selected as the appropriate candidate. A massive 'Army of Indus' comprising of approximately 20,000 soldiers and 38,000 Indian camp followers set forth (Dalrymple 2013: 152). Mohan Lal's contribution in the war effort was multifaceted - a trifecta of intelligence gathering, diplomacy and strategic assistance to the British. He collected vital information, infiltrated enemy networks and worked as a negotiator on critical occasions.

When the army reached Kandahar, Mohan Lal received a crucial piece of intelligence that Haji Khan Kakar, a prominent noble of Dost Mohammad was ready to offer his allegiance to Shah Shuja (Lal 1846c: 206). Another key breakthrough achieved by him was instrumental in helping the British army storm the Ghazni fort. He obtained vital information from Abdul Rashid Khan, a rival of Dost Mohammad, that one of the gates of the fort had not been reinforced and thus was vulnerable to attack. A plan was devised to blow open the gate using explosives and storm the fort in a surprise attack. This proved to be a masterstroke and caught the Afghan defenders off guard. Ultimately, with the power of the British bayonet, Shah Shuja ascended the throne in August 1839.

However, all was still not well in Afghanistan. After their victory, the British soldiers settled in and around Kabul and took on Afghan wives and mistresses which was a cause of great indignation among the natives of the city. Another cause of growing discontent was the system of dual government adopted by the British officers. In a tone critical of his colonial masters, Mohan Lal wrote,

“we neither took the reins of power in our own hands, nor did we give them in full measure into the hands of Shah Shuja ul-Mulk. Inwardly or secretly, we interfered in all transactions, contrary to the terms of our engagement with the Shah; yet outwardly we wore the mask of neutrality” (Lal 1846c: 313).

The Afghans were a fiercely independent people who valued their autonomy and resented foreign control (Elphinstone 1815: 231).ⁱⁱⁱ They quickly realized the weakness of Shuja's position and rumblings of discontent began to be heard. The tribal leaders were also angered by the cuts in their subsidies. Nobody understood the gravity of this measure better than Mohan Lal

who wrote that, “For a deduction of a few lakhs of rupees we raised the whole country against us” (Dalrymple 2013: 276). They quickly turned against the British and their first target was none other than Burnes. Mohan Lal had advised the British officers like Burnes and Macnaghten every step of the way but they paid no heed to his warnings which resulted in their violent deaths at the hands of the Afghan insurgents. By the autumn of 1841, the entire edifice of British occupation in Afghanistan came crashing down. Disaster had befallen the British.

Mohan Lal was soon captured at the orders of Akbar Khan, son of Dost Mohammad and the leader of the insurrection. He was subjected to solitary confinement, regularly beaten up, tormented, and money was extorted for his release. Mohan Lal made multiple appeals to the British authorities at Jalalabad to mediate his release but to no avail. Ultimately, he managed to escape from the clutches of Akbar Khan and saved himself. Even after suffering every imaginable agony, his spirit remained undeterred and he continued to supply regular information to the colonial authorities at Jalalabad and even tried to win over the rebels to the British side. His intelligence network was so strong and impenetrable that despite the strictest watch on him and the roads leading to Jalalabad, not even a single letter of his was ever intercepted. Mohan Lal also played a key role in plotting the assassination of key Afghan tribal leaders. He borrowed large sums of money under his own name to pay bribes to Afghan leaders to ensure their support during the retreat of 1842. But the death of Burnes and other British officials who had authorized these loans left him with no proofs of these financial claims due from the government.

The Afghan debacle ended Mohan Lal’s career as a political agent. He emerged as a rare hero of this otherwise disastrous campaign but his multiple petitions and pleas to the colonial authorities to get a reimbursement fell on deaf ears even if he did receive a generous pension from the East India Company. After the catastrophic end of the Afghan campaign, he embarked on a journey to Britain in 1844-46 to lobby influential supporters to help him recover from his heavy losses amounting to around Rs.80,000 incurred in Kabul. During his time in England, he received a private audience with Queen Victoria. He also went to Scotland to return Burnes’ papers to his father in Montrose. Around the same time, he also brought out an expanded version of his travel account with the title, *Travels in the Punjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan to Balkh, Bokhara and Herat and a visit to Great Britain and Germany* (1846), which documented his experiences in Europe.

Legacy

Despite all the highs of his illustrious career, Mohan Lal was sidelined after the Afghan war. He applied for the post of Mir Munshi at the prestigious residencies of Lucknow and Hyderabad but his requests were denied. Despite his many petitions, he never received any employment from the British government. His colonial masters profited from his resourcefulness but in the end ignored him. He became disillusioned with the way he was treated after the war, dejected and riddled with financial troubles he spent the later years of his life in obscurity mostly in Delhi and Ludhiana. Fate often acts in strange ways and the same was true for Mohan Lal. The adventurous early decades of his life were in complete contrast to his uneventful twilight years. The details of his later life are few and far between. After narrowly escaping the wrath of the mutinous sepoys in 1857, he married Hyderi Begum in the same year. Mohan Lal died in 1877 and was buried in his garden called Lal Bagh, presently on the Delhi-Panipat Road (Gupta 1943: 331).

Mohan Lal's life and career clearly illustrate the rewards as well as the pitfalls of an intimate association with the British. Even though Anglicized Indian officials received many opportunities during the colonial rule, they still could not rise beyond their British counterparts. Writing about Mohan Lal in the foreword of Hari Ram Gupta's book, Jawaharlal Nehru stated,

“In a free India a man like Mohan Lal would have risen to the topmost rungs of the political ladder. Under early British rule, whatever he might be or whatever he might do he could not rise higher than the position of a Mir Munshi or at most a Deputy Collector” (Gupta 1943: vi).

Mohan Lal experienced history unlike anyone else. As a young man of 19 travelling for the first time beyond his paternal roof, he displayed immense courage and tenacity. In the following decades, he traversed the entire geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan and Central Asia playing a crucial role in gathering intelligence and negotiating with local rulers using his nuanced understanding of the region's culture. Both British officials and local people regarded him as 'a cultural intermediary' (Fischer 2006: 243). He possessed a power of persuading not just common people but powerful leaders. He could bring every one to a common agreeable point not by deception but by suggestion (Gupta 1943: 333). Mohan Lal's undercover operations performed at great personal risk, were instrumental in securing alliances and shaping political developments. He was a pioneer in the exploration of the North-West frontier and his noteworthy contributions paved the way for a host of Indian spies and adventurers who came to be known as the 'Pundits'. Indian explorers like Nain Singh, Sarat Das, Kishen Singh Rawat and others who were trained under the aegis of the Great Trigonometrical Survey, carried his legacy forward and performed remarkable feats of geographical exploration in places as diverse as Western Turkestan, Eastern Turkestan and Tibet.^{iv}

Beyond espionage, Mohan Lal also excelled in the field of diplomacy and became secretary and confidant to Alexander Burnes. During his years in Europe, he received an invitation to a Royal Ball from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. He dined with the directors of the East India Company and was made an honorary member of many English clubs (Lal 1846a: 517). His influence reached the highest echelons of power in Britain which was quite rare for Indians at that time. As an author, his works including travelogues, memoirs and reports provided a first-hand account of the events in Central Asia and Afghanistan through the lens of an Indian, which is rare in the Great Game literature as most of it was written from a Western perspective be it British or Russian.

Mohan Lal's life mirrored the social milieu of 19th century India. His memoirs provide valuable insights about the early days of colonial rule in Northern India, of the prevailing conditions in the Lahore Durbar at the height of its power under Ranjit Singh, and British campaigns through Sindh and Afghanistan in the early decades of the 19th century. His journals are a treasure trove of insights into the lands beyond the North-West Frontier of British India, replete with personal observations offering fascinating glimpses into lives of common people. Moreover, his accounts are not merely descriptive in nature but offer critiques of local customs and at times raise questions regarding British policies. He admitted that he was not proficient enough in the English language (Lal 1834: iv) but his decision to use it as a medium for his writings is indicative of a conscious choice to court the favor of his colonial employers. His calotype photograph, possibly the first of an Indian, captured by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in 1844 (Stevenson 2002: 91) also symbolizes his pioneering presence in history. His decision to educate his daughter in England was a pioneering act which reflected his progressive stance on gender and learning, challenging the social norms of his time.

Mohan Lal's life and career offer a unique glimpse into the crucial role played by Indians in British imperial politics. His work, often behind the scenes, highlighted how Indian agents like him were instrumental in the expansion of the British Empire. His life also embodied the cultural complexities of colonial rule in India, as he effortlessly navigated multiple identities (Hindu, Muslim, British agent.) and left an indelible mark on history. He acted as a bridge between cultures and his life was shaped by a blend of Eastern and Western influences. His thirst for adventure and daring exploits in Central Asia and Europe distinguished him as a remarkable figure of the 19th century. Yet, his obscurity in popular culture and memory underscores the absence of non-Western voices in colonial narratives. Mohan Lal Kashmiri's remarkable life and legacy offers a unique lens into the heroic efforts and resilience of individuals caught in the currents of empire and highlights the often-overlooked role of local actors in global power struggles making him a significant if underappreciated figure in 19th century geopolitics.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ from the Preface, "Our houses were also sold by our creditors, and we passed a very unpleasant life."

ⁱⁱ from the Preface, "No man who like myself has fallen into poverty, with no place to reside in, and no money to live upon, can prosecute his studies with the requisite spirit."

ⁱⁱⁱ An interesting incident was narrated by Mountstuart Elphinstone in his book 'An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul' which is clearing indicative of the Afghan character and their resentment of foreign occupation and control. During the course of a conversation an old Afghan man said to him, "We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood, but we will never be content with a master".

^{iv} For more information on the Pundits see Waller (1990).

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