

# UNCOVERING A FORGOTTEN HISTORY

New Canadian co-production brings the tragic story of Maharajah Duleep Singh to big screen

The Black Prince, a historical drama based on the life of a deposed Sikh king who attempted to regain his crown and heritage “will touch anybody’s heart,” says the film’s executive producer, Jasjeet Singh.

The story of Maharajah Duleep Singh, a 19th-century ruler whose progressive and wealthy kingdom was taken from him as a child by colonizing Britain, will be familiar to anyone from India’s Punjab region. The producers of The Black Prince, which opens in theatres July 21, expect it will also resonate with international audiences. The movie opened both the London Indian Film Festival and Toronto’s sixth annual International Film Festival of South Asia in recent months.

“This [story] politically belongs to one community. But as a story of a boy who was separated from his mother and kingdom and faith and community, this story is very human,” says Singh. “Who am I? That’s the crux.”

The film was written and directed by L.A.-based, British-born Kavi Raz. He’s best known as a TV actor (St. Elsewhere, Star Trek: The Next Generation) and previously directed the 9/11 drama The Gold Bracelet. The new film centres on Duleep Singh as a young man and his struggle to regain his kingdom and further Indian independence.

Duleep Singh’s father died when he was an infant, and he took the throne at age five. Yet when the kingdom was annexed by the British East India Company after the second Anglo-Sikh war in 1849, Duleep had to forfeit his crown, along with his kingdom’s considerable riches. He



The Black Prince centres on Duleep Singh, played by Punjabi singer-poet Satinder Sartaaj, and his struggles to regain his kingdom and further Indian independence. Contributed

gave the legendary 105-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond to Queen Victoria. It’s now one of Britain’s Crown Jewels.

He also lost his identity: Separated from his exiled mother, Maharani Jinda (played by City of Joy star Shabana Azmi), Duleep converted to Christianity, though he later regretted it. He was taken to England at age 15, becoming the first Sikh to immigrate to Britain, and lived in Perthshire, Scotland, where he earned the nickname The Black Prince of Perthshire. Raised amid wealth as a teenager and living in a Scottish castle, he was considered something of “a spoiled kid,” says Singh: a mischaracterization the film’s producer hopes to set straight with The Black Prince.

Duleep embraced British life

“This is a missing chapter in Indian history.”

— Jasjeet Singh, executive producer

and grew close to Queen Victoria — she would be godmother to his children — though their relationship became tempestuous as he began to reconnect with his heritage and seek answers for what happened to his kingdom. His life changed dramatically following a reunion with his mother in his mid-20s. Their meeting sparked a desire to learn about his birthright and return to Sikhism. He was desperate to go back to Punjab but he was never

allowed to. He died in Paris at age 55, having “lost everything,” Singh says.

Filed in Britain and India, The Black Prince focuses on the years following Duleep’s reunion with his mother, his growing awareness of his heritage and its affect on his relationship with Victoria.

The movie opens as India prepares to celebrate its 70th Independence Day on Aug. 15. Popular Punjabi singer-poet Satinder Sartaaj makes his big-screen acting debut in the title role. He also performs songs on the film’s soundtrack. “I was very impressed with his performance,” says Singh, who adds that not only does Sartaaj work in both English and Punjabi onscreen, he also looks remarkably like the real-life king.

Jason Flemyng (X-Men: First Class, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button) co-stars as Duleep’s Scottish guardian John Login, and Amanda Root (The Iron Lady) portrays Queen Victoria. Toronto actor and singer Rup Magon, a member of the Canadian Bhangra group Josh, plays the King’s attaché.

Making the film was a labour of love for the cast and crew, says Singh, a historian who studied and wrote about Duleep’s life in university. The \$5 million production is his first feature film. Its U.S.-British-Indian-Canadian co-producers include Brillstein Entertainment Partners, which made the Best Picture Oscar-winner 12 Years a Slave. “This is a missing chapter in Indian history,” Singh says.

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