

Deuskar Lectures

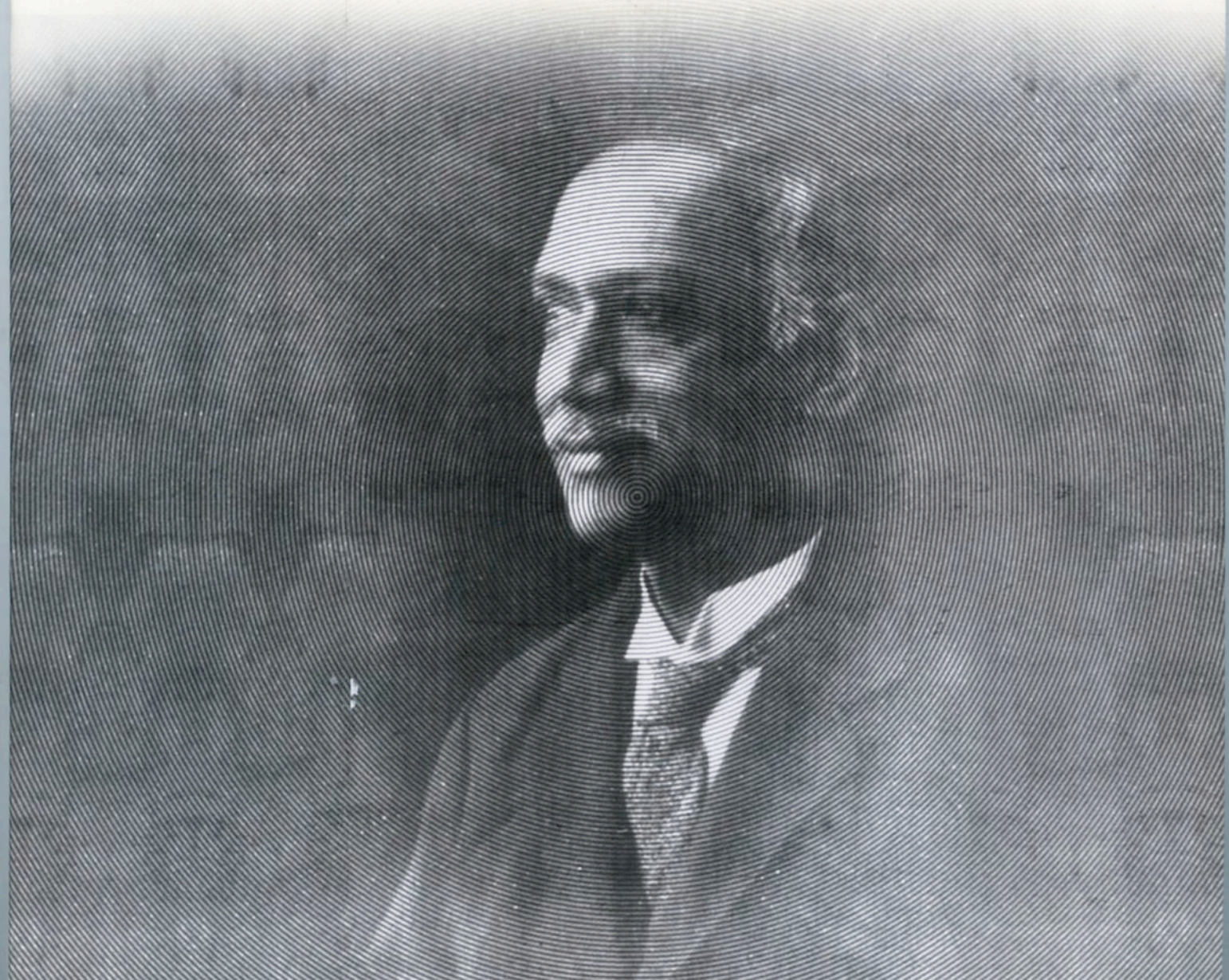
READING SIR JADUNATH

Literature and History

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07

Archive series



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The Statesman as Hero:
Imperial Aesthetics of
Sir Jadunath's
Political History



"Unquestionable facts" signified true patriotism for Sir Jadunath Sarkar. One way to understand what Sarkar could have meant by "true"—as opposed to "false"—patriotism would be to examine his use of the word *tragedy* with regard to the fall of the Mughal empire. The use of this word was not original with him. He may have owed it to the historiography developed by colonial officials. He was not even the first person to speak of the "rot" of the empire that allegedly set in in the concluding decades of Aurangzeb's reign. For Sidney Owen argued precisely that point in his *The Fall of the Mogul Empire*, published in 1912. Owen remarked in his preface: "A common impression is, that, as it is so often the case in the East, the decline and fall of the Mogul Empire were due to the degeneracy of its Sovereigns. But it is the object of this book to show that it was irretrievably ruined in the reign of Aurangzib, a monarch of great ability, energy, and determination, but lacking in political insight, and a bigoted Mussulman."¹

But Sarkar's use of the word *tragedy* also marked a departure from the way European writers had used it to describe the fall of the Mughals. The word connected his sentiments of patriotism, his aesthetics of historical prose, and his training in literature. More importantly, it let him express a particular view of the political that we will discuss in this and the following lecture. We will not understand Sarkar's ideas regarding historical methods unless we see that for him, politics turned around the question of virtue and thus around the idea of character. The imperial literary canon supplied him with the tropes necessary for such an exercise, the tropes of heroism and tragedy. Readers will recall that Muslim historians and chroniclers of the eighteenth century also spoke of the vices and virtues of the sovereign and used the image of "rot" to describe the disintegration of

the Mughal Empire over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We need to understand both what Sarkar's political imagination owed, and what it did not owe, to the late Mughal and the imperial British traditions, respectively, in order to see what may have been distinctive about his political and historical imagination. That exercise will also help explain a point about his method: why the category of "character" was so important to his historical analysis, a topic that we take up in the following lecture.

Why Political History Was Literary

Sarkar's political sensibility could not be separated from his literary sensibility, nor the latter from his sense of what historical writing was. He saw his historical prose, ideally, as literature, and he referred to his authorial endeavors, throughout his life, as his literary work. "Literary grace is the *sine qua non* for my Foreword, as for an essay in the *Edinburgh Review*," he wrote to his friend and collaborator G. S. Sardesai in 1931 after the latter made some complaints about a foreword Sarkar had penned for the multivolume selections from the Peshwa Daftar records that Sardesai had edited.² Or, in his old age, he would write thus to Sardesai in 1943: "In my growing years of accumulation of unfinished literary work, I must husband my time and energy in future."³ And later, in 1948: "I have been passing my days in a sort of living death in the damp heat of Calcutta since my return. . . . I can do no literary work in the climate, but have to pass my days like a bullock or a dog."⁴ Or even more depressingly in 1955, when his old age had been troubled by a series of bereavements and losses in personal life: "I am facing my 86th birthday without any joy and without that serene look at the future which is the highest reward of a well-spent life.