

Delhi A Novel: A Mingled Tissue of History and Tears

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Khushwant Singh paints on a big canvas and depicts the history of the eternal capital city of India -Delhi, and the same is the history of India and the main theme of the novel Delhi: A Novel. Delhi has been the power centre forever. It has been the main centre of historical activities. It had been ruled by Pandavas, Mouryas, Guptas, Rajputs, Turks, Mughals, Britishers etc.

The city of Delhi is a cluster of many capital cities scattered across. It remains the seat of power as its permanent place. Khushwant Singh takes an extraordinary zeal to depict the history of this city combining episodes and anecdotes in this novel which is a masterpiece and a modern epic. Singh puts his words through the Sikh guide, who tells Bhagmati: "After I had memorised the names of a few dynasties and emperors and the years when they ruled, all I had to do was to pick up anecdotes to spice my stories." Singh has much more interest in a queer blending of history, romance and sex.

In this novel, Khuswant Singh focuses on six centuries ranging from Ghiasuddin Balban to the assassination of Indira Gandhi leading to the massacre of Sikhs. He comes across many people, emperors, eunuchs, poets, prostitutes, saints, and soldiers. The novel celebrates the city of Delhi, its glory, its mystique, and its cosmopolitanism. It is a collection of accounts, fictional mostly, of the rulers of the city of Delhi. He loves it a lot. His love for the city reminds the words of Dr Johnson, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life".

In the gradual unwinding of the novel, we watch the drama of love and passion, laughter and tears of a set of puny figures, which history does not care to remember. In the Foreword to the paperback edition, Khushwant Singh writes, "I put in it all I had as a writer; love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta and violence- and above all, tears." There are eleven historical and non-historical persons- Musaddi Lal, Timurid, Jaita Rangreta, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb, Nadir, Meer Taqi, Alice Aldwell, Nihal, Bahadur Shah, Son of a builder of Delhi, Rama Rakha son of Sai Dita- a refugee from west peek. Out of eleven five are makers as well as narrators of the history of Delhi- Timurid, Jaita Rangreta, Aurangzeb, Nadir, and Bahadur Shah, the remaining six characters are improvisations of the author, and their role makes as the makers of minimal history.

Singh writes every alternate chapter on Bhagmati. The character of Bhagmati resembles Tiresias, a blind priest in Sophocles' Oedipus- the King. Singh pictures Bhagmati with the city of Delhi. It assumes multiple identities as a site, text, and persona. Bhagmati, the eunuch whore is a metaphor for Delhi and history simultaneously. Her character epitomizes reconciliation between the antithetical elements, reconciliation to one's situation psychological, social or economic. The novel accounts the history of Delhi from the eyes of an old Sikh; named Mr Singh. The old Sikh

guide finds Bhagmati and Delhi the same. The novelist beautifully parallels the old Sikh's passionate romance with both. "As I have said before I have two passions in my life; my city Delhi and Bhagmati. They have two things in common; they are lots of fun. And they are sterile" It is not history but a lesson for those who read history. History is best appreciated when we live through it and this is exactly what the book does. O.P. Mathur writes: "Michel Zeraffa writes that with the novel, society enters into history and history enters into society. The words can be applied to 'Delhi.'"

Musaddi Lal is a fictitious character of Khushwant Singh; he is a real example of medieval Delhi. He views the life of the new convert to Muslim along with his wife as a testimony to the then-fast-changing society of Delhi. His best efforts to get himself assimilated into the just emerging new society and his half-successful attempts to this end speak volumes of trying times. The novelist presents the predicament of Musaddi Lal in comic and ironic manners. He belongs neither to the Hindus nor to the Mussalmans. Whatever Musaddi Lal says about himself is shockingly true. His truthful experience and despicable plight may be seen in his own words; "Whether we were Hindus or Mussalmans, we would reply we were both. Nizamuddin was our umbrella against the burning sun of Muslim bigotry and the downpour of Hindu concept."(62) Hindus disown him and his wife shuns him. The Muslims exploit and disdain his company. Indeed, he is like a eunuch.

The invaders coming to India had always tried to demonstrate their superiority by destroying places of worship that belonged to the people following a religion other than their own. For instance, the Turks demolished twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples. They built the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque on its ruins and buried idols of Vishnu and Lakshmi underneath the entrance gate so that the Muslims going in to pray would trample upon them.

Timurid justified his invasion by saying that it was a holy task enjoined upon him by Allah. He also motivated his troops by invoking their religious zeal. He summoned all his nobles and "We told them that our object in undertaking the invasion of Hindustan was to bring infidels to the path of true religion and to purify the country from the filth of polytheism and idolatry...." (96) Timurid truly believes that the hands of Allah sanctify his act of invasion. His army also believes in it, and so they can fight with tremendous zeal and emerge victorious. Superior military tactics also contribute towards their success. Even so, people are not willing to take things lying down. Singh realistically recaptures the horrors caused by the marauding forces of Timurid who had killed more than half of one lakh people.

Nadir Shah also invaded Hindustan to rid it of infidels and restore Islam to its rightful place. " We will not allow an Islamic kingdom to be despoiled by heathens... We would soon be taking the road to Delhi to put the House of Mughals in order and to restore the kingdom of Hindustan to Islam." (172). After the plunder of Nadir Shah, Delhi became a wasteland where gangs of Rohillas, Marathas, Jats and Sikhs preyed upon the people. Strangely, both of them had invaded India in the name of Islam. The same happened when the rulers of India were

themselves Muslim and the upholders of Islam. Religion was used as a tool for acquiring untold wealth and riches.

The chapter, "The Untouchables" brings to light some of the lesser-known aspects of the Sikh religion. No doubt Khushwant Singh's considerable erudition in the field of Sikhism helped him to fashion this chapter authentically. The narrator is Jaita Rangreta, an untouchable, who lived in Rikabganj. Jaita Rangreta became a Sikh to establish a feeling of self-worth. 'What have we poor untouchables to do with kings?' I remember my Bapu saying- "They are all the same to us One goes, another comes. Zulum goes on. ... My Bapu called every Badshah a zalim" (124). This reveals the plight of the people on the lowest rung of the social ladder and their kings' indifference towards them. Ensuring social equality among their subjects was never a concern of the rulers. The situation is not very different today either.

Aurangzeb too believed that since Allah had given him birth in the dynasty of kings, it was his duty to serve humanity and to spread Islam. He ordered his commanders — Mir Jumla, Shaista Khan and others, to extend the domain of Islam to the furthestmost comers of Hindustan. The Mughal army gained victory over several kingdoms. However, the duty of a monarch is not merely to extend the realm of his empire, but to keep his subjects happy by treating them as equals. Aurangzeb demolished temples and raised mosques upon their ruins. He forbade drinking and forced prostitutes and dancing girls to marry or leave his empire. The Muslim subjects were happy with all this. The Hindu subjects, however, were far from happy due to his discrimination against them. Nihal Singh recounts: "When I was a child Mai told me of Aurangzeb, King of Delhi, who had cut off the head of our Guru. She called him Auranga and spat whenever she used his name. I also learnt to thoo on Aurangzeb's name."(301) He believes in it because he knew that the Sahibs were wise people. In this way, the Sikhs were used to fight the Muslim rebels. The British enlisted Pathan and Biloches and Punjabi Muslims to fight the Hindu rebels. The revolt was also triggered as a result of religion.

The Indians regarded the English as superior and so their mutual relationship has always been lopsided. This is also exemplified by the awe with which Nihal Singh held Hudson Sahib. Their relationship can be taken as being representative of the relationship between Indian soldiers and their British officers. The Indian soldiers held their British officers in great esteem and had blind faith in them.

The slave mentality of Indians is evident. They are easily brainwashed and easily led. Nicholson Sahib is regarded with so much reverence that some Sikhs go so far as to believe that he is an incarnation of one of their Gurus. And they begin calling themselves 'Nikalsainis' whereas the English officers did not care for their Indian subordinates. When Hudson Sahib was taking stock of the number of casualties incurred during the revolt, he only counted the number of Whites who had died or had been wounded. He even counted the number of horses that had died or had been injured.

The Builders shows the interesting relationship between Sujan Singh and his son Sobha Singh. This chapter also reveals the relationship between the Indians and the English. In those days, the words of the father were sacred to the son. Sujan Singh teaches his son all the cunning and the various ploys required to establish a successful business. Religion also continued to remain an important pun of politics and was exploited to the hilt by the English. Corruption had become an accepted part of the business.

The “Dispossessed” depicts the complete fragmentation of the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims that culminates in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. This paper traces the growth of militant organizations which exploited young boys like Ram Rakha. Boys who had suffered in some manner due to the Muslims were indoctrinated. They were then motivated to indulge in terrorist activities against Muslims. This breakdown of mutual relationship among the two main communities of India extends to the breakdown of the relationship between the Sikhs and the Hindus, as seen in the last chapter, “Bhagmati”. This too culminates in the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the mass killing of Sikhs in Delhi.

Delhi ends on a sad note, indicating that communalism has come to stay in India and soon India will consist of a seething mass of different communities perpetually at loggerheads with each other. The separatist movements in different parts of India today, are a testimony to this tragic fact. A Note from the Author Khushwant Singh writes, ‘History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid into it. Delhi emerges ultimately as a sterile, dying city, a stale diet of past glory, fawning flatterers’ city, a questionable, unlovable, ungrateful and cowardly city. As one goes through the book, one feels as if he is watching a colourful movie with different shades, turns, and different phases of the life of the city, its glory and shame, joys and sorrows. As in movies, Singh uses the flashback technique quite effectively with the highest degrees of perfection. His literary talent is versatile. He tends to accept the world as it emerges from his varied experience of life and his positive approach to problems of his existence. The novel depicts not only the historical scenario of Delhi but it is also the history of India. It is not a history lesson but a lesson for those who have read history. He tackles the subjects of religion, politics of society and history. This is one of the best books in modern English Literature. He puts bare the Indian society with its contradictions, balances, caste, communalism, the strife of races and ethnicities, and the spirit of unity and diversity. Alternating past with present and present with past, the narrator and his mistress Bhagmati, the eunuch, Singh follow a recurring pattern. In the process, he makes a veiled inquiry into modern political history, which gravitates around Delhi, the capital of India. The history, personages and anecdotes give lots of fun, pleasant, distasteful, ugly, repulsive and yet alluring.

What Khushwant Singh wants to say can be put in the words of Gulzar:

“There is nothing new in New Delhi.....

Except that every five years a new government comes in
And converts old issues to the new scheme”

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