

PUNJABI SAGA

By Prakash Tandon

Published by Rupa & Co.

Price: Rs. 295/-

A Review by Althea Phillips

The first thing that strikes you about *Punjabi Saga*, Prakash Tandon's revised and updated autobiographical trilogy is the picture of a lush "sarson ka khet" on the jacket cover. And the author goes on to reflect that same spirit of abundance and earthiness in all the three novels, as he talks of the amalgam of influences which have made the Punjabi race what it is. In the process, what is revealed to us is the uniqueness of Tandon himself forward looking, much ahead of his time, resourceful, hardworking, religious, traditional yet modern. The first novel, *Punjabi Century*, spanning 100 years from 1857 to 1957 gives a vivid account of life in West Punjab blending autobiography with national history. The text is liberally splattered with Punjabi words. Tandon's eye for detail and meticulous recollection of past events makes the novel a delight to read.

Unlike the usual grim picture one gets, Tandon gives a pleasant portrait of the British. "The Punjabis were puzzled at the first sight of the Englishmen because they had never seen any people look so implausible... fear soon gave way to curiosity." Many were the "textbook blessings" of the Englishmen", he adds saying that his grandfather's generation praised them unreservedly.

Short sketches of his grandfather Maya Das, granduncle Thakur Das, father Ram Das and his mother follow. Tandon dwells at length on his father Ram Das, a civil engineer in the irrigation department of the Punjab government. He describes family life in canal colonies (his birth being in one such colony-Bullokee) and other places like Sargodha, Muzaffargarh, Bahawalpur and Lahore to which his father was transferred.

He talks astutely of the *biradari* (brotherhood), the position of women, conduct, coming of age, arranging marriages of the "little palpitating red bundle" and illicit love affairs of the widows. Virginity was sacred though, he stresses. "Punjabi is a quaint language, slow, indelicate and lusty," he says admitting candidly that "The Punjabi excels in love and abuse", with women making it almost an art while quarrelling with a neighbour!

A full chapter is devoted to the arranging of his uncle Dwarka Prashad's marriage to Savitri. Intrinsic details of the wedding, rites and rituals and her *bidai* showcase a traditional Punjabi wedding which, alas, had changed with the times. Unfortunately, Savitri died in childbirth, her child dying with her, with Tandon launching into an elaborate description about the funeral rites.

In Manchester, England where he went to study commerce, he says, "Life had a fullness I had never known before" he bashfully recalls the appearance of a Swedish girl Gard (who later became his wife) into his life and his visit to Sweden with her. "What took my fancy was her nose".

Beyond Punjab revolves round Tandon's career in management, giving a lucid picture of British India in the last decade of their rule. Tandon returns to India after seven years in England. His search for a job leads him to Unilever in Bombay where he joins the advertising department on probation.

Reminiscing about colleagues like John Rist and Thompson Walker, he recalls it was Walker who explained to him the essentials of market research. He remembers advertising in the papers for temporary market research investigating jobs for girls. One Anglo-Indian, two Indian Christians and one Maharashtrian Hindu came forward. The girls, he chuckles,

created quite a sensation when they went out to question the housewives.

Tandon's astute observations of the cities he visited in the course of his work, the people he met flow out spontaneously. Train travel in India then, he says, was a complex affair divided into 11 layers. The first class having Europeans and the last live chickens! In Karachi he came across the Anglo-Indians who "seemed creatures of a twilight world..." Calcutta "had an air of a past more affluent than the present....the city filled me with depression."

With World War II, Market Research closed down and he was put in the press section of the advertisement department. He thought of signing up for the war but was politely turned down.

The arrival of Harvey Duncan brought to the forefront an unknown Vanaspati brand, 'Dalda'. His ad campaign involved setting up a small stall outside Bombay's Novelty cinema hall and asking passersby to test the fat by rubbing it on the skin.

He recalls coming across "a slight, pale-faced girl", Amrita Sher-Gil, in a hotel, and Jawaharlal Nehru, who "talked in a shy, hesitating manner" on a train from Bihar to Bombay and also the infamous "small, dark" Nathuram Godse, then a newspaper editor in Poona turning up in his office.

The demand to ban vanaspati became a widely debated national issue with Tandon throwing himself in with unusual zeal to defend his industry.

Tandon does not forget to mention his Unilever colleague, Maurice Zinkin and his wife Taya who "between them made me write a book.... To my surprise I found I wrote easily and enjoyed doing it.... The past began to live with the clarity of today."

Return to Punjab has Tandon tracing his rise to the chairmanship of Hindustan Lever after the indisposition of Steve Turner, then his career with the public sector State Trading Corporation and the Punjab National Bank.

The attitude of the government towards the private sector, competition from the Tatas, union problems, his first long-term union agreement are some of the early memories of this period. On meeting a colourful union personality, George Fernandes, he observed "There was an innate niceness in him" while the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai was a "forbidding presence".

He dwells at length on his close association with Vikram Sarabhai and Kamla Chowdhury which began at the Ahmedabad Textile Industry Research Association's annual conference in 1956.

The conscientious father in his recalls worrying about his daughter Maya's Americanising education at Woodstock which made him shift her to Maharani Gayatri Devi's school in Jaipur.

It is indeed a marvel that Tandon, who lived for over seven years in England, travelled the world and even married a foreigner, rising to become Hindustan Lever's first Indian chairman, and serving on the board of so many companies, has remained a thorough Punjabi in heart, body and soul with his "roots still strong and fresh".

When he comments that "we Punjabis accepted partition fatalistically...after centuries this was just another turn of the wheel of fate...." It is as if he is speaking for the whole of Punjab.

An authentic document of the Punjab that was - and the Punjab which Tandon hopes could be!

[Courtesy: *The Sunday Statesman*]

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