

MY BLEEDING PUNJAB
By Khushwant Singh
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*A Review by I.J. Singh**

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Khushwant curiously dedicates this book to Giani Zail Singh who, he says, "stood for the Khalsa Panth." Yes, Punjab is bleeding but the hemorrhage is from the wounds inflicted during Zail Singh's tenure as the President of India, and much of the Khalsa Panth equates Zail Singh's actions at that time with those of a Quisling. First, I wonder if, by this dedication, Khushwant was indulging his well-known wit or some new found Joycean sense of humor. But he was serious, and all I could think was that if Zail Singh is the embodiment of the Khalsa, may God have mercy on the Khalsa, Zail and those who call him one!

Khushwant is at his best when he describes his own role - his ordeal in 1984, returning the honors bestowed upon him by the Indian government, remarks in the Rajya Sabha and in press conferences. His credibility with the Sikhs rested upon these actions and also upon his excellent writing of Sikh history and translations of Sikh scriptures. But this multifaceted man has often been contradictory in his analysis of the present quagmire in Punjab; this becomes clear from the present book. His standing with Sikhs therefore, has plummeted in recent years.

There is a sensitive piece on the importance of the Golden Temple to the Sikh psyche and how the Indian government erred in attacking it, though he is wrong in thinking that it means less to Sikhs since 1984. His comments on Sikh history and Punjab are good, though many will object to his crediting the British for the growth in Sikh identity in the twentieth century. He proffers a reasonable peace plan except that it places less of an onus on the Indian government than many would like to see. He is clear that the killings of the Sikhs in November 1984 were organized by the ruling political functionaries. He shows little respect for the infamous White Paper on Punjab produced by the Indian government. He comes down hard on the Sikhs for their vacillation but presents little detail. Although he and many others found in the Rajiv Longowal accord an acceptance of the Sikh demands, yet to many there is little in the accord that could be labeled "Sikh" —most of the issues are not limited to the Sikhs, and not handled by the Sikhs in a particularly sectarian manner. Echoing government spokesmen, Khushwant believes that Pakistan foments trouble in Punjab. But the evidence for this presented by the Indian government is not very detailed or convincing. Also, an enemy can take advantage only of a house divided. He thinks the Sikhs have to work at proving that they are Indians first. Many feel the burden is on the majority community to show the Sikhs that they have a place of dignity in India. The more important issue is why and how did the Sikhs become so alienated from India? Has Khushwant or the Indian nation forgotten that the contributions of the Sikhs to modern India are far in excess of their numbers; for example, better than half of all Indians who were sentenced for life by the British during India's struggle for independence were Sikhs. **Sikhs have a place in India**

by their origin as well as by their blood and sweat. A loyalty test peculiar to the Sikhs is pernicious and malevolent. Why did a people with such a massive contribution to India's freedom, its economic recovery, unity and survival as a nation become so disenchanted with it? There are no clear answers, nor does Khushwant provide any.

The book has a long diatribe against Bhindranwale and short paeans to the virtues of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. To be fair to Khushwant, he faults Indira and Rajiv for the unsolved mess in Punjab, but that is not the central theme; his most potent anger is reserved for the Sikhs. It is a Punjabi (Sikh) trait to be most impatient with oneself or one's own people for lapses.

Khushwant fails to address some issues. Less than two weeks before the attack on the Golden Temple Rajiv publicly declared "Bhindranwale is a religious man and we have nothing against him." Did Bhindranwale metamorphose into the devil so quickly that a massive army attack became necessary on the martyrdom day of Guru Arjun? Alternatively, was Rajiv Gandhi misinformed when he gave a clean chit to Bhindranwale, or did he mis-speak *a la* Nixon? Rajiv was then the General Secretary of the ruling Congress party and the heir apparent to his mother Indira, the Prime Minister of India.

When Bhindranwale was in custody prior to the attack on the Golden Temple, why wasn't he tried? Even now most Sikhs would be satisfied if an impartial, judicial inquiry with honestly collected evidence presented in open court (the key word here is "honest") found Bhindranwale guilty. Clearly though a candid court and similarly honest criteria and proceedings would also have to judge Indira Gandhi for her actions, Rajiv for his duplicity, Zail Singh for his malfeasance, along with many others currently in government. I wouldn't take odds on that in modern India? To poke fun at Bhindranwale for his rustic manner and unpolished speech, as Khushwant does, is unbecoming; in no way does it diminish Bhindranwale. To be rustic is no crime, to chide him for it no sign of maturity. And I am emphatically not trying to defend Bhindranwale. Khushwant forgets that most educated Sikhs were not all that fond of Bhindranwale before June 1984. He notes correctly that the Indian government has made a martyr of Bhindranwale and that "uneducated" man has now, rightly or wrongly, become the symbol of Sikh defiance to the government's repression, unjust laws and virtual reign of terror in Punjab. Many have alleged that Zail Singh and the Indira Gandhi clan (cabal?) initially promoted Bhindranwale. Was it only when he outgrew his handlers that he became a major embarrassment to the government? That whole decade when Zail Singh consolidated his power and became a dominant though divisive power broker in Punjab politics needs closer analysis; the seeds he sowed then appear to have borne the bloody fruit that Khushwant - and all of us - lament.

I am with Khushwant that in a nation where pygmies like Zail Singh, Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, etc dotted the political landscape, Indira Gandhi was a virtual giant. But I submit her legacy is one of lasting damage to India's institutions. One of her closest confidantes once proudly said to me "India as a nation rests on a tripod whose legs are socialism, secularism and democracy." That sounded noble but I had to remind him that when Indira declared a state of emergency in the country, suspended the Constitution and for over a year ruled by fiat, she sawed off the leg of participatory democracy; when *she* and her henchmen, for domestic political

reasons, exploited Punjab politics and converted what was a manageable political-economic issue within the framework of the Indian Constitution into a religious confrontation with overtones of Sikh separatism, she sawed off the leg of secularism, leaving Mother India perched precariously on a one-legged stool of socialism. That Indira Gandhi misjudged the Sikhs and brought India to the brink of fragmentation is history. When Indira and her sycophants promoted the idea that “Indira is India” they damaged India’s democratic institutions. A democratic society deserves a different outlook in its leaders. I do hold that political bosses should be deposed by ballot and not by bullet and prefer the fumbling alternatives of democracy to the competence of authoritarianism. I agree with Khushwant that Indira wanted a strong, united India, but history might remember Nehru as a founding father of modern India, but his otherwise able daughter, Indira as one who brought the nation to the brink of fragmentation. Rajiv, her loyal son, had a historic opportunity to depart from her confrontational policies when he signed an accord with the Sikhs, but then he lost his nerve, vision - or both.

In looking at violence by so-called Sikh separatists, Khushwant is on thin ice. He fails to note that significant violence was done by government agents. The Indian Home ministry admitted the existence of government sponsored extra-legal units of terrorists who commit mayhem outside the law. The anti-terrorist statutes allowed the security forces to hold people without trial, to maim and kill without accountability. When a government regards its citizens as cannon fodder, can you expect a more civilized response from the citizenry? Let me pose another issue. Everyday we used to hear that so many Sikh terrorists were arrested or killed in encounters. (Khushwant notes that many such encounters are fake.) I would think that it must be a wonderfully adept and efficient police that can identify the political bent of separatists” so quickly — within minutes of a killing — none was ever tried in open court with evidence and the right to rebuttal. We also know from governmental reports that over 2700 Sikh men, women and children were killed in Delhi alone within two days in November 1984. If this police is so “efficient” in the Punjab, how is it that more than eighteen years later, none of the killers in the nation’s capital has been convicted? Is this not the same police, same training, same expectations, same country, or the same laws?

I agree with Khushwant that what happened in the Punjab is terrible. What Sikhs are doing to each other in the name of Sikhism is shameful. But I single out here the glaring contradictions in individual behavior of many Sikhs — Zail Singh, K.P.S. Gill, a few Delhi based Sikhs who honored H.K.L. Bhagat, and others. ‘No Sikh can feel pleased or proud. Khushwant provides a thoughtful perspective on a complex issue. Unfortunately, it will be used by Sikh-baiters for more repression and not more justice. Khushwant, the lawyer-historian-journalist fails to note three requisites to an enduring society: there has to be rule of law, laws need to be just, and justice must be evenhanded. The government of India and its surrogates in Punjab have failed all three criteria for the past several years.

These days many Sikhs blame either the Hindu dominated Indian government or the British for the systematic betrayal of the Sikhs leading to the present impasse. This book is different. Khushwant convincingly shows that considerable blame rests with the divisive, short-sighted, unfocused politics of the Sikhs and their self-centered politicians who appear largely ignorant of history, unable to comprehend

ideas or conceive of long-term strategies. Sikh leaders, by and large appear to have practiced tribal, factional politics fueled by the limited needs of instant self-gratification.

If a writer knows how to grab your attention and hold it consistently, it is Khushwant. His talents as a gifted story teller are on full display here. He has written an emotionally charged but an important book. There is good reason for the anger, but anger alone does not often make for good analysis. Khushwant says in his preface "Since I am an Indian, a Punjabi and a Sikh, my responses to the events narrated in the book are understandably emotional. For this I make no apologies." For many of his readers - primarily Punjabi and Sikh - the response will also be visceral. Like most of us, Khushwant is so deeply immersed in the tragedy of Punjab - the anger is raw and searing - that he or any historian is not yet able to render an objective account. Perhaps we need time and distance from harsh emotions.

In closing, Khushwant expresses the wish "to be shot by a Khalistani. terrorist." I hope the Khalistanis have better sense and he is disappointed; it takes more than a violent death to make a martyr. If many Sikhs are now angry with Khushwant instead of being grateful for his past services, he should look at the glaring inconsistencies in his recent writings - like this one - instead of bemoaning his fate. While I always admire *how* he says things I wish I could equally admire *what* he says here. In this book Khushwant says a lot and says it very well, but a lot of what he says is not true - and a lot that is true, he does not say.



BOOKS RECEIVED

Guru Nanak's Siddha Gosht & Slokas of Ninth Guru (in Tamil)

Translated by J. Prabha & Samuel Stephen (ed. Dr. N. Muthu Mohan)

Published by Guru Nanak Devji Chair, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai. 625021. Tamil Nadu. (Oct. 2001)

Pages 36 Price Rs. 25

Ever since the Chair of Guru Nanak studies came to be established in the sacred city of Madurai, a steady stream of writings on the Sikh lore and scriptures has poured forth from the university for the benefit of Tamil readers.

This booklet selects the definitive *Gurubani* of Guru Nanak - *Siddha Gosht* and the evocative shlokas of Guru Tegh Bahadur for transcreation, in graphic Tamil verse, by two keen post-graduate scholars of the Madurai Kamaraj University. The introduction, in English, by our longtime friend and former Chennai representative, Sr. Raminder Singh provides the backdrop for this notable publication.

An admirable literary endeavour, welcome for its pioneering spirit that spiritually links the South with North, even as it opens a window for most Tamilians to look into Guru Nanak's exposition of philosophy of human existence, God's purpose and social justice.

- S.S.

The Beauty of Being: A Mytic's Vision of Reality

By Manjit Singh (A.V.M. ret'd.) and Ms. Gursheek.

**Published by PLA Publications, # 320 Sector 44-A, Chandigarh. 160 047.
Pages 96. Price Rs. 125.**

The gifted visionary, an air marshal (retired) and a young talented writer have joined hands - and minds - to script a clutch of philosophical essays, or rather vignettes of mystical thought and verses that seem to touch the heart's innermost recesses. Dr. (Mrs.) Gyan Verma's Foreword aptly described the handbook as "a refreshing celebration of the timeless parent-child relationship of the Creator and His Creation." But the real pleasure is in reading and sharing these varied reflections. Over three score essays and poems express many moods and provide intimations of immortality of a soul drenched in love of God.

- S.S.

Exploring Sikh Spirituality

The Paradox of Stereotyping in Contemporary American Setting

By Nirmal Singh

**Published by Sanbun, A-78, Naraina Indl. Area I New Delhi. 110 028.
pp. 168. Price Rs. 200 (US\$12.50)**

The author, a former consultant to UN and business executive who lives in USA, has been a past president of Connecticut Sikh Association. He is a prolific writer on a variety of current issues and a regular contributor to ***The Sikh Review***. His activism in representing the Sikh belief system at many an interfaith convention is an asset for the open society of North America.

The present volume, made up of a dozen or so lucid essays, shows Sr Nirmal Singh's catholicity and eloquence. Highly readable, the themes tackle philosophic as well as work-a-day issues. Sample: Societal Ills and Pursuit of Justice: The Sikh Paradigm, or Music and Sikh spirituality. Writ large across the pages is the author's love and devotion as well as his eloquence. Of topical interest are the essays on Sikh Stereotyping in the US and Sikhs and the media. We strongly recommended this collection essays that addresses key issues, and presents a refreshing viewpoint on Sikhism's most vital aspects.

- S.S.

