CHAPTER IV

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The revision of the indigenous culture and communal history has come to constitute an important preoccupation amongst the Indian English novelists. They evince an increasing preoccupation with thematizing Indian history. In *Train to Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and *Delhi* Khushwant Singh has attempted to re-view the cultural and communal history of modern India. With novelists like him, historical fiction becomes a means to re-visit received histories and investigate the ontological issues pertaining to their facts and fiction. How the historical sense and reality enter into the sphere of art is an important issue in any systematic assessment of the achievement of Indian English novelists like Singh.

Khushwant Singh has observed India as an outsider and an insider. He has achieved a delicate between his sense of involvement with India and his scrupulous objectivity in assessing her achievements. In an 'Evening with Authors' programme held in Bombay on 1 December 1969, Singh described himself a writer of history and not mere fiction. "I write about the people I detest most,"¹ he

added. His fiction presents a unified vision of man and his milieu. World War II, struggle for freedom, the partition of India and other such events of momentous importance stimulated his imagination.

Khushwant Singh has produced in Train to Pakistan a gripping and powerful story of the history of partition of India and Pakistan. He was greatly moved by the harrowing events during those turbulent days. It was indeed one of the bloodiest upheavals of history that claimed innumerable innocent lives and resulted in loss of property. "The Partition theme", writes Khushwant Singh, "was born out of a sense of guilt that I had done nothing to save the lives of innocent people and behaved like coward". ² He repeatedly reminded himself: "Nothing venture, nothing have". ³ Of the two books he wrote, one was on the theme of the partition, and the other on his own community.

Train to Pakistan describes the wide-spread massacre of the Hindus and Muslims by each other. Early in the novel, the novelist depicts vividly the situation of the country in the wake of the partition:

By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people - Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs - were in flight. By the time


the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding. The only remaining oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. 4

Communal frenzy engulfs the remote villages like Mano Majra where Sikhs and Muslims had lived in peace. The arrival of a ghost train filled with corpses from Pakistan creates a commotion. Events move fast, and the fate of individuals is decisively affected by the catastrophic events of the partition. The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, but feelings of brotherliness have not disappeared. Muslims are evacuated to a refugee camp at Chundunnagger, later to be transported to Pakistan. Hindu fanatics vow revenge upon Muslims for what Muslims have done to Hindus in Pakistan. Juggat Singh learns of the plot of the Hindu fanatics to blow up the train with dynamite as it passes through the railroad bridge. He begins to slash at the rope connecting the explosive material with his kirpan. He is fired at, but clings to the rope with his hands and cuts it to pieces. The engine of the incoming train "was almost on him" and thus the train "went over him, and went on to Pakistan". 5

The predominant quality of Train to Pakistan is its stark realism, its absolute fidelity to the truth of life, its trenchant exposition of one of the most moving,

5. Ibid., p. 107.
even tragic, events of contemporary Indian history. The individual in Khushwant Singh's fictional world is silhouetted against vast, panoramic background, the great human catastrophe of the partition of India and the ghastly and inhuman events which followed it.

The basic human and social tension in *Train to Pakistan* arises out of the interaction of forces which operate in the communities of Mano Majra, a microcosm of rural India. It presents rural Punjab with its religious and caste divisions, which result in alienation. Hate alternates with love, anger alternates with affection; the desire for revenge alternates with the impulse to sacrifice. Out of the interaction of these mutually conflicting forces arises the fundamental tension of the novel. The continual change in the efficacious operation of forces - good and evil, affection and alienation, friendship and hostility, union and division - is a significant aspect of the movement of thought and feeling in the novel. Mano Majra is, thus, what John Bunyan would have aptly called "the world".

The act of dacoity described in the first part of the novel highlights the this-worldliness of Mano Majra, its deep involvement with materialistic reality. This earthly world in *Train to Pakistan* offers a close parallel to the world of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. Khushwant Singh, in attempting to capture the physical reality of the human world, comprehends and depicts with insight the small,
apparently insignificant, gestures, facial expressions, nuances of behaviour of his characters and makes them come alive in his portrayal. The descriptions of Hukum Chand's actions and attitudes are notable. He narrates in true bureaucratic style how he heard reports of convoys of dead Sikhs and Hindus passing through Amritsar and how Sikhs retaliated by attacking a trainload of Muslim refugees bound for Pakistan. It carried a thousand corpses and also the words of bitter irony: "Gift to Pakistan".  

In assessing the awful situation of bloodshed and mass murder Hukum Chand maintains his characteristic balance and poise, but the Sikh sub-inspector is carried away by the force of prevailing popular prejudices against government action or inaction:

Sometimes, Sir, one cannot restrain oneself. What do the Gandhicsaps in Delhi know about the Punjab? What is happening on the other side in Pakistan does not matter to them. They have not lost their homes and belongings; they haven't had their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters raped and murdered in the streets.  

The sub-inspector allows himself to be sentimentally involved in the situation marked by communal passion and hostilities, whereas Hukum Chand, the more seasoned, experienced, and balanced bureaucrat, does not lose his perspective, and replies: "We must maintain Law and order".  

7. Ibid., p. 31.  
8. Ibid., p. 32.
Hukum Chand's ideas, attitudes, and actions set into motion forces which lead to the almost inevitable climax of the novel. From a socio-political point of view, the distrust, rivalry, and mutually implied contempt between old seasoned bureaucrats and newly crowned power-conscious politicians, which are some of the significant aspects of growing democratic institutions in India, are very well brought out in the portrayal of Hukum Chand and the sub-inspector. The internal tensions of democracy provide Khushwant Singh with fruitful areas for the portrayal of character and situation beset with failings and weaknesses including inefficiency, corruption, unscrupulousness and greed.

Train to Pakistan is limited in scope. According to Chirantan Kulshreshtha, "At times, as in Train to Pakistan (1956), the climax is reached through super-human sacrifice and heroism, but such isolated instances of nobility do not point to any pervasive moral outlook, and one is forced to conclude that in Khushwant Singh's fiction the emphasis is generally on the bleak state of affairs. The laughter, wherever there, is dark". 9 The sub-title is characteristically Indian, and the novel presents a very turbulent part of the Indian history and sordid aspects of its life with visionary power.

In fact, the novel is a brilliant exploration of the theme of partition. It does not only narrate a touching

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tale of the times of the partition, but also presents some unforgettable scenes and sights of the great historic events artistically. It communicates the novelist's vision of life, his unique interpretation of life through the depiction of the political and historic events. The novel is remarkably vivid in recording the scenes and happenings of those terrible days of the partition. He portrays the reality of the holocaust by laying the blame of the horrible tragedy upon the two communities:

The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. 10

*Train to Pakistan* for all its obvious fascination with violence is a profoundly moving and moral work.

*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) is the second novel of Khushwant Singh which reflects a picturesque view of contemporary Indian life and conventions. It is an exciting, thrilling story of a people emerging independent. The action of the novel takes place in Amritsar from April 1942 to April 1943. It is the time of the 'Quit India Movement'. Prior to it, the Japanese had got remarkable success in South-East Asia, which perplexed the British government. Now the Britishers had to face the ruin of Indian Empire. In the meantime, the Indian patriots were confident of the end of the Raj and sought freedom from the clutches of the English people by revolutionary methods.

Khushwant Singh presents the reality of Indian life in all its dazzling and bewildering variety in a photographic way as it is. Indeed he is intensely conscious of his social milieu and does not fail to reflect in his works. He has depicted the sordid realities of life by giving the true account of the complexities of the relations in a family and thereby touched the dark aspects of life.

Khushwant Singh is essentially a chronicler of modern India. His *A History of the Sikhs* (in two volumes; 1962, 1966) is one of the greatest achievements on a comprehensive scale to tell the story of the Sikhs from their inception to the present day. What gives centrality and unity to Singh's *A History of the Sikhs* is that of the moral, cultural, religious and national expression. The story of the Sikhs in India, writes Khushwant Singh, "is the story of the rise, fulfilment and collapse of Punjabi nationalism".11 A history of the Sikhs is thus a testament of national self-expression, race, language, culture, religion, and social and moral ethos.

In his novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* he wisely restricts himself to those aspects of India and Indian life which he knows best. The novel has a historical and contemporary context, which is rooted in character and situation. The story opens on a note of violence that recalls the religious fanaticism, the hallucination of moral

self-vindication, which caused and excused the partition atrocities: "There should be a baptism in blood. We have had enough of target practice".  

Khushwant Singh is again pre-occupied by the theme of the antithesis between violence and right moral conduct. The redemption could be possible only through personal sacrifice, honesty and consistency. The implications of the novel's title are pessimistic. When Sabhrai asks her son what India will gain with Independence, his answer is optimistic: "Spring will come to our barren land once more... once more nightingales will sing". Then, when Sabhrai dies she says, "I will not hear the nightingale, my son" a remark which is a pessimistic pronouncement about the outcome of Independence. Sher Singh and his father, Buta Singh are the main symbols of the new India and represent the political upstart and the sycophantic administrator, respectively. On account of their impetuosity, recklessness, and aggressiveness of youth, many Indian revolutionaries, in the course of the chequered history of India's struggle for freedom, followed the way of violence and bloodshed. This represents wanton abuse of the sanctity of life principle - holiness, filial devotion, prayerful devoutness, martyrdom.

Sher's symbolic killing of the good crane anticipates his later symbolic matricide. That he could

12. I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, p. 3.
13. Ibid., p. 79.
become little better than an Indian version of a bloody General O'Dyer, the English general responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, is suggested by the fact that he has obsessively come to love his dog, whom he had named Dyer after the most hated person he could think of. That Sher Singh, given power, will betray the sikhs and their way of life is a foregone conclusion. Khushwant Singh is distrustful of the conversion of youth to the idea of political revolution, and condemns the 'religion of sword' philosophy as a rationalisation of violence. When he weeps after being kicked by the Anglo-Indian Sergeant, the Indian head constable whispers: "Be a man. Don't degrade yourself before these White bastards". Sher Singh's moral cowardice is thrown into incriminating relief by his mother's spiritual strength which, significantly, was inspired by the picture of the last warrior Guru: "There was a man".

Although *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* lacks a code hero, it has a heroic figure in Sabhrai, who manifestly "has the dignity of an ancient people behind her". She is the female spirit who becomes the saviour of lost souls. She embodies the instinctive understanding of life and the wisdom of the race. "Sabhrai", says Khushwant Singh, "was possessed of that sixth sense which often goes with the people of deep religious convictions". People believed that

15. Ibid., p. 178.
16. Ibid., p. 204.
17. Ibid., p. 220.
"She had some sort of intuition, and the healing touch". She embodies the ancient culture of the race and her mystical awareness of life baffles even the most sophisticated and articulate exponents of intelligence. By virtue of her moral rigour and instinctive wisdom she becomes a towering figure, far higher in stature than others in the novel.

Khushwant Singh's is characterised by an abundant variety both in technique and subject matter. One of the significant themes of this novel is re-creation of the past through portrayal of the events from recent Indian history. Singh has turned to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism as to cherish the memories of the bygone days. The factual and informational values of history illuminate the subject matter and increasingly whet the readers' curiosity. For Singh history is a handmaiden which helps him to achieve several purposes.

Allen Tate, who distinguished between "historical novels" and "novel as history", says that for novels to be considered as history, as material for historians, the prerequisite is the author's familiarity with the cultural structure and beliefs of a given society at a given moment. It is the author's ability not only to recapture the past but also to observe and reflect it. It requires an ability to journey back and forth in time, indicating that the past is never really dead. To quote Khushwant Singh:

18. Ibid., p. 125.
So does the past cast its baleful shadow on the present. But nowhere do the shadow of history assume such bizarre pattern as they do in Delhi's coffee house.  
This brings to our mind T.S. Eliot's views on historical consciousness expressed in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Historical sense according to Eliot, involves a perception not only of the past, but of its presence. It compels a man to write with a feeling that the whole of the present and the past is in him. This historical sense is the sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, and of timeless and temporal together. The past and the present exit in the same continuum of time, each illuminating the other, and it is difficult to identify the razor-thin line which separates the past from the present. Today's politics is the history of tomorrow. As a natural corollary, history and politics are inseparable, with a large nebulous zone which is common to both. The recurring historical patterns, like the mythical ones, as also the similarity between the message of the past and the lessons of the present, point to the fact that one cannot treat history and politics separately; they constantly tend to merge.

Delhi may be said to belong to the category of the "novel as history" refers to the historical consciousness of a writer. Such historical consciousness is peculiar to

Indian writers and Khushwant Singh is no exception. Allen Tate, like T.S. Eliot, elaborates on this consciousness by specifying that it is a consciousness of the past in the present. Throughout Khushwant Singh's novel references to the past emphasize the historical inter-relatedness of time as well as the significance of the present.

Khushwant Singh is as much a historian as a novelist. But history does impose limitations on him. He is not free to distort history, for factual accuracy has to be strictly adhered to. "Herein lies the additional burden", writes Chaman Nahal, "that a historical novelist places on the artist. The novelist is obliged to do careful research into the period he has chosen for presentation and every detail of that period has to be accurate". 20 The novelist has to be accurate in respect of details not only about a geographical region but also about the people living in that region, their mode of speech, their dress, their food habits, their peculiar traits and countless other characteristics of that particular community.

It is hazardous, however, to infiltrate too much history into the plot of a novel or to have too many historical figures among the leading characters. History puts the author at a disadvantage since a great majority of characters who have an independent historical reality can hardly be made amenable to the reader's design or the

exigencies of the plot. The interaction of historical and fictional characters, and the interaction of the two kinds amongst themselves, is the most challenging part of writing a historical novel. As the blurb of Delhi informs us, travelling through the time and space and history to discover his beloved city the narrator meets a myriad of people - poets and princes, saints and sultans, temptresses and traitors, emperors and eunuchs - who have participated in (and have been witnesses to) the major historical forces that have shaped and endowed Delhi with its very special mystique - and as we accompany the narrator on his epic journey we find the city of emperors transformed and immortalized in our mind for ever. Khushwant Singh has tried to tell the story of Delhi from its earliest beginnings to the present times. He has constructed it from records chronicled by eye-witnesses. Khushwant Singh writes in 'A Note from the Author': "History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and injected blood". He took twenty-five years to complete it. Delhi spans the history of Mughuls, princes and paupers, pimps and prostitutes, dervishes and saints, the Turks, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. Delhi is Khushwant Singh's bold attempt at writing a historical novel. The novel, however, is not merely history, but a work of art. It is simultaneously autobiographical and reminiscent. Khushwant Singh quotes the poet Ghalib in the epigraph of his novel Delhi:
I asked my soul: What is Delhi? She replied: The world is the body and Delhi its life.  

The responses and reactions of different persons to this monumental work may vary. To some people, Delhi may strike as a novel based on sheer philandering and sex.

Delhi has been vibrant with life. It is a throbbing, pulsating city evergrowing and possessing an enormous retaining capacity. It accepts; it rejects; it screens; and it selects. Khushwant Singh has tried to capture all its moods and royal fancies from time immemorial covering all its vicissitudes. There are ups and downs, comings in and goings out which always present a picture of contrast. In this great city of India, prosperity and poverty run parallel to each other. It is aglint with the moonlit canopy, the star-studded sky overhead, but is also flooded with wanton spilling of blood. It is replete with pleasures and resplendent with wealth and affluence. It is also fraught with impoverishment, animosity, jealousy, greed and murder.

Delhi stands out as an epitome of the worldly cultures. It has become the nursing bed as well as the bed of experiments of the sustenance and nourishment of varied religious faiths - Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. Singh's Delhi has also witnessed the rise and growth of the Sikh religion and the growth and downfall of other religious faiths.

The Turkish invaders and Muslim fanatic rulers of India, i.e. Taimur Lang, Nadir Shah and Aurangzeb, echo more or less the same tone as we flip from one chapter of the novel to another. Taimur Lang's and Nadir Shah's object to invade Hindustan was to bring 'infidels' under control, only to lead them to the path of true religion, and also to purify this land from the unislamic stigma of poly-theism and idolatry. He also held:

In order to gain their (The Turks) support and to tie up their tongues, it is necessary not only to excite their zeal for Islam but also their greed for gold. 22

Nadir Shah, too, wanted to rehabilitate Islam in India. Aurangzeb developed a boundless hatred of religions other than Islam. He claimed to have "levelled temples of idolatry to dust and raised mosques on their ruins". 23 He introduced laws and rules that were designed to stand as a bar to the progress of other religious faiths.

In Delhi we meet the poet Meer Taqi Meer, whose extreme love for Begum Rais Sahiba brought out some of the best poems from him. It is her love which makes him as well as destroys him. In the words of the poet himself:

For the time she was my mistress she made me feel as if I was the only God she knew and every sentence I wrote was like a sura of the Quran. She became at once my mother, mistress,

22. Khushwant Singh, Delhi, p. 97.
23. Ibid., p. 159.
nurse and companion. ... This woman made me and destroyed me. 24

Delhi also acquaints us with Shah Jahan’s passionate love for his queen Mumtaz Begum. When this favourite queen passed away, the bereaved made the most attractive and magnificent mausoleum, the Taj Mahal at Agra to immortalize her memory.

Singh has given the story of Delhi from the time of Prithviraj Chauhan to the assassination of late Mrs. Indira Gandhi. While celebrating the past of Delhi, he has illuminated only some of the significant periods and episodes beginning with the reign of Chiasuddin Balban (13th century). From this he passes on to the reigns of certain other rulers of the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, the invasion of Taimur, the reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, the invasion of Nadir Shah and its aftermath, the revolt of 1857 and some of the political events of modern India like the partition of Bengal, the shifting of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, the Khilafat Movement, the activities of the terrorist revolutionaries, the Round Table Conference, the major events leading to the communal riots, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the terrorist activities in the Punjab and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.

The bases on which events and characters have been

selected for delineation seems to be only the novelist's personal preference and the extent of inspiration provided to him by them. In fact, he has skipped over large and significant areas of the history of Delhi such as all the Hindu rulers, a number of Muslim rulers including some of the Moghuls, the gradual rise of the East India Company, the Quit India Movement, the Indian Independence and the partition, the Chinese War and the two Pakistani Wars. Among the events of more recent history, while the Kashmir problem and Emergency have been totally ignored, inordinately long space has been given to the Punjab problem and anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The murderous activities of Bhindrawale and the Sikh terrorists have been dismissed or have been glossed over as those of a "demented monk and his gang of armed goons", equating him with Indira Gandhi who did "a stupid thing"\(^{25}\) in launching the Operation Bluestar. Along with the most surprising omissions of the attainment of Independence and Delhi becoming the capital of free India and the omission of the Emergency, no modern Indian personality including Tilak, Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Maulana Aazad and Rajendra Prasad, to name only a few, has been considered as important as Nadir Shah, Aurangzeb or Bahadur Shah Zafar. They have not even received any worthwhile mention if at all they have been mentioned.

The principal theme of this mammoth novel is the growth and development of Delhi—which has witnessed the

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 383.
rise and fall of several Muslim dynasties. History and legends are curiously blended in the growth and fall of Delhi's Lal Kot, Siri, Chiragh, Tughlakabad, Kotla, Ferozshah and Shahjahanabad. In this novel, we get glimpses of the city's mythical past as well as accounts of its more recent military and social history, which sound authentic and authoritative. The history of Delhi begins with mythological allusions to Tilpat, one of the five villages that the Pandavas offered to accept instead of their lost kingdom. The story of Delhi, according to Khushwant Singh, begins with the River Yamuna brought to the plains by an enraged and intoxicated Balram. Singh has in mind the situation as existed at the time he describes, and draws on his own experience. The antipathy of the Muslims towards the Hindus, the Sikhs against the Muslims, the Hindus against the Muslims and finally the hatred of Hindus towards Sikhs are all expressed in Delhi. The anti-Hindu feeling that has prevailed ever since the first Muslim invader came is emphasized throughout the novel. The only chapter devoted to a non-Muslim is on "The Untouchables" and, incidentally, that too is devoted to the Sikhs. The arrogance of the Islamic leaders, their dreams of uprooting Hinduism and their belief that they are the only race capable of salvaging the Hindus comes through characters like Taimur, Aurangzeb and Nadir Shah. They all feel that the Islamic force of life is the very spirit of civilization. They are often portrayed as 'Villains' of medieval Indian history. They are made to appear on the stage and, like Browning's
villains, narrate what they did and how and why they did it. The author has made them condemn themselves through their own mouths. Thus this ' unholy' trinity primarily stands for the love of power, religious fanaticism and lust for wealth—the banes of politics in modern India.

But what is more important in the novel is the gloss given to it, the flash and blood with which the novelist covers the skeleton of history. It is this that makes the novel highly enjoyable and significant. The author has used the technique of first-person narrative. Narrating the incident in this manner enables him to mingle fact and myth in an effective manner. The bulk of the material of history consists of the ways of the lives and attitudes of common people. Out of the nine historical chapters seven are largely monologues of ordinary men. As regards the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, in the last chapter, the narrator of the novel himself takes on the task of the historian.

The auto-biographical part entitled 'Bhagmati' alternates with the historical part. Through it the author finds an excuse to lapse into the past. In this rallying between the past and the present the author many a time loses contact with the narrator. The wanton, frolicking, abusive narrator of the first few chapters turns thoughtful and remorseful in the end. The narrator of the earlier chapters on Bhagmati is an eye-witness to the 1984 riots. Twenty years intervene between the first and the last
chapters; the author no longer haunts historical places of Delhi to pulsate the past but sits as a helpless victim to his times. He has come over the mixed feelings of a Don Juan or a Casanova. He earlier brags about his victories and gives elaborate descriptions of not so important matters of life of a man who picks up any woman he comes across, but later feels impaired due to old age. The depiction of old age as seen in Bhagmati is very powerful. Bhagmati, the 'hijda', is the sole companion to the author till the very end. The quixotic author finds a helpless Bhagmati in youthful days in a shabby state: "she nodded her head I wiped the bloody froth on her mouth with her own sari and helped her to her feet. She smelt of sweat and urine". 

Ironically enough, in the end the author confesses:

I stagger to the other side of the garden with Bhagmati tugging at my arm and pleading with me to get back into the room. ... Bhagmati tells me to change my trousers. I feel ashamed of myself.

The novel ends with a bizarre scene at Gurudwara where the author perhaps has found his roots: "I see Budh Singh in the Gurudwara courtyard beside the smouldring ashes of the Granth and the Bhai".

Bhagmati enters the centre-stage in the very first line of the novel. The narrator of the Bhagmati chapters is

26. Ibid., p. 33.
27. Ibid., p. 389.
28. Ibid., p. 391.
obviously a Sikh, who is perhaps the author himself. The heart of the story is the city itself. This is actually a love-story about the author/narrator and the city. If this romance is difficult to understand may be it is because Bhagmati as a metaphor for Delhi echoes the confusion behind the author's own obsession with the city. Singh admits:

I make Delhi and Bhagmati sound very mysterious. The truth is that I am somewhat confused in my thoughts. 29

This confusion is writ large on the work. There is enough evidence in the work to infer that Singh has introduced Bhagmati as a symbol for the sterility of Delhi, both physical and spiritual. Singh himself confirms that Bhagmati symbolizes Delhi. He writes:

It [the hijra] can never conceive and I thought this was a wonderful symbol for a city in which so much has happened like a sexual intercourse that repeats itself. With Delhi too, with all that has happened to it in the way of violence, in the way of change of dynasties, it has still not produced anything as great as one would have expected of it. 30

The parallelism - Delhi: Bhagmati - is correct only to a certain extent. Both Delhi and Bhagmati have been plundered and pillaged. But Delhi is not sterile. It has always been in a state of flux. Its growth from a small hamlet into a cosmopolitan city is a tribute to its capacity for change

29. Ibid., p. 2. Emphasis added.
and for absorbing and assimilating different strands of culture. There is an overdose of sex in Delhi. Khushwant Singh himself admits:

I have no inhibitions in writing as explicitly as I can about (sex) ... I am a dirty old man. I will remain a dirty old man and I will write as a dirty old man. 31

A superficial reading of the novel may mislead us into thinking that Bhagmati metaphor is a mere erotic embellishment. But Bhagmati metaphor is Khushwant Singh's sincere attempt at connecting past and present. He starts building Delhi-Bhagmati parallelism right from the beginning of the novel. He writes:

It is only to their [Delhi and Bhagmati] lovers, among whom I count myself, that they reveal their true selves. 32

Then he goes on to elaborate on this thesis. In order to understand the true selves of Delhi and Bhagmati one has to use a simple formula: "Use your heart not your head, your emotion not your reason". 33

Thus Delhi is a historical novel with a difference: its narrative framework is contemporary, if not wholly autobiographical, and its range spans over six centuries. It has no single character or group of characters around

31. Ibid., pp. 1-2.
32. Khushwant Singh, Delhi, p. 1.
33. Ibid., p. 2.
whom the events are clustered, the only recurring characters are the author-narrator and his eunuch 'mistress'. Even the spirit of the place, in spite of the title, is not too evident, for Delhi is only the footboard on which the events narrated occur. The novel is almost like a series of video cassettes of selected episodes from the past prepared by one of our contemporaries for us and with a narration of events in the narrator's life also. The work is a veiled inquiry into the politics of modern India whose centre is Delhi. It seems to provide an answer to some of the problems looming large before us — communalism, extremism, regionalism and violence. Its message is of significant contemporary relevance — the quality and fraternity of man, love and peace as positive virtue emerging from the repulsive and senseless bloodshed both in medieval and modern times.

No matter what the themes of Khushwant Singh's novels are, they have strong overtones of events that played a crucial role in the history and making of India. As a keen observer and social critic of the history of India, he has faithfully interwoven them in the themes of his novels to create the setting and the Indian background. Michael Zeraffa writes that with the novel society enters into history and history enters into society. The words can be applied to Delhi, perhaps in a way not meant by the writer. The novelist has provided to history a contemporaneity, a gloss, both veiling and illuminating, which seems to assume more importance than the historical material itself. In
these snapshots from history, the filter is not less important than the object. Delhi, in brief, is a re-creation or re-interpretation of the past by the present for its own purposes.