Chapter IV

An Insight into the Soul of a City

Khushwant Singh’s third historical novel Delhi -- A Novel depicts the story of the eternal capital of India. Its history is, indeed, the history of India. That the novelist took twenty-five years to complete this work is a point to be pondered over. The wide canvass as well as the massive treatment of history has given the work an epic dimension. The history commencing with the Sultanate rule (1206 –1526), continuing through the Mughal rule (1526 – 1776), the British rule (1776 – 1947) and ending with the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 provides the novel a larger structure.

The massive treatment of history in this novel is indicative of the growth of the artist in Khushwant Singh. The handling of the historical material in the earlier two novels has given him confidence to view history on a wider perspective and to make use of the same in a potent form in this novel. The history of India rather Delhi spanning from Ghiasuddin Balban to the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the reign of terror let loose and the horrendous crimes perpetrated on the innocent Sikhs following the death of Indira Gandhi makes it a magnum opus of historical fiction. Blending history, romance and sex, the novelist re-enacts the past of Delhi, making it an interesting piece of art.

Khushwant Singh’s passion for history especially the Mughal and the contemporary is distinctly evident in the work Delhi -- A Novel. He has added the words “a novel” in the title because readers may mistake it for an interesting history book. Unlike in the other two earlier works, history dominates in it and fiction is like a strong spice added to flavour the work. A detailed account of the Indian history from Balban to the assassination of Indira Gandhi is dealt with in an artistic way. The
reader never finds a dull moment while reading the 391 pages of this absorbing novel, taking him to the bygone era.

The Sikh narrator acts as a tourist guide to the English lady Hoity-Toity. This woman was an archaeologist and was a cousin to the Queen of England and came to India as a tourist. Her interest in archaeological sites in India was immense. She wanted to explore some old sites in order to see whether she could dig up something. “This explains that the novel is a tourist guide version of history, but this history is added with spicy tales by the author–narrator” (Dubey 101). The narrator details his amorous adventures with foreign tourists and proudly says he never missed an opportunity to flirt with foreign women. Thus, interesting historical facts and imaginary episodes involving the mischievous narrator go hand in hand into the making of this novel.

That the Mughal History and Delhi cannot be separated is a fact well-known to everyone in India. Acutely aware of this, the novelist has chosen the city of Delhi as a hero. He has concentrated on what makes Delhi a human document. He shows a wonderful insight into the heart and soul of the city and its people at various phases of existence.

Delhi is the story of a grand failure, the failure of a city’s inhabitants, its past and present. It is the story of races who failed to exploit their potential; society which has failed to appropriate for itself values that make a people discover and realize themselves, a civilization that has crumbled before attaining its true destiny; traces of the glory that could have been served to heighten one’s sense of the magnitude of the failure. (1)
The novel, indeed, is an emotional reconstruction of the story of Delhi. It portrays the emotions of the rulers, conquerors, traitors, builders and the people on the streets. The Sikh narrator dons the role of a passionate lover and commentator. He brings before the readers eyes noisy bazaars, dirty dead rivers, narrow lanes, stench of raw sewage and loud-mouthed citizens. Besides, all the Muslim rulers from Ghiasuddin Balban to Bahadur Shah Zafar, and the other very important personages such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nathu Ram Godse and Indira Gandhi are brought into the narration because their lives were intrinsically connected with the fate of Delhi.

The kaleidoscopic presentation of the capital by Khushwant Singh scatters the radiance of multi-coloured gems that throw their brilliance indicating the historical significance of Delhi and the hysterical extravaganza of sexual excesses of its inhabitants and especially the sexual exploits of the Sikh narrator with a transgender named Bhagmati whose life is inextricably linked to the night life of Delhi.

The narrator, known for his ambassadorial activities at the high level, acts as a guide to many a foreign diplomat visiting Delhi. Occupying a flat, he is venerated by the ever vigilant watchman. Unmindful of the mighty sojourns and returns of the tenant at unearthly hours either alone or in the company of stray girls or transgenders, the watchman remains a passive spectator. The narrator’s paramour Bhagmati is a betel-chewing whore keeping company with him. She wants to be taken around the city and the suburbs; and thus begins the narration of the historicity of the great city and the adjoining regions and history becomes alive in the pages of Khushwant Singh.

Bhagmati enjoys a comfortable journey by car with her passionate lover. She is taken around places such as Tilpat, Yamna, the Holy River, Amphitheatre at Anangpur, Swaraj Kund built by Tomara Rajputs during the 7th and 8th centuries and christened after the ruler Swarajpal. Lalkot, a red-sand citadel, stands testimony to the
excellence of the architecture of the era. These are portrayed vividly by the novelist as samples of the splendour of ancient monuments.

The camel, the ship of the desert, is shown as the mode of transportation on the sandy terrains. Gujar women are seen active and busy patting buffalo dung on the withered walls. Bhagmati represents the hijdas (transgenders) inhabiting LalKuan. She gets a chance to have a glimpse of Patel Nagar on Ridge Road, the famous Lohia Hospital, the Piccadilly Circus of Delhi, the Cannaught Circus, not to talk of Palam Airport and the abode of the criminals, Tihar Jail.

The admirable Delhi Gate leading to Faiz Bazaar, majestic Moti Mahal, fabulous Fatehpuri Mosque, the astounding Ajmeri Gate, and the resplendent Red Fort are brought before the reader’s eyes. The aweful orchards and the mesmerizing landscape add lustre to Qutub Minar. Jamna River glides like a celebrity. People come in for a dip in Triyama. People of various cultures and habits wind their way to Qutub Minar. Matchless Jamali Kamali’s mosque, Jahaj Mahal with inscriptions carved “Musaddi Lal Kaisath of Mehrauli” in the reign of Sultan Ghausuddin Balban speak volumes of the Sultan Dynasty.

In a foreword to the paperback edition of the novel, Khushwant Singh states:

It took me twenty-five years to piece together this story spanning several centuries of history. I put it all I had in me as a writer: love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta and violence -- and above all tears. I did not write this novel with any audience in mind. All I wanted to do was to tell my readers what I learnt about the city roaming among its ancient ruins, its bazaars, its diplomatic corps and its cocktail parties. My only
aim was to get them to know Delhi and love it as much as I do. (DAN
i)

The novel begins with the arrival of the Sikh narrator to his beloved city Delhi, after his stay abroad for a long time. His absence from Delhi makes him look at it with wonder, as if he is seeing it for the first time and accentuates his admiration for it. He declares his passion for Delhi and his love for Bhagmati, a hinda whore, is immense. He tells the reader that going to prostitutes to enjoy life has been a common practice since the times of the Mughals in the material culture. Prostitution has almost become an institution. History relates the influential roles of whores in the Mughal courts. Immediately after reaching Delhi, he seeks the company of Bhagmati. The love episodes concerning the nameless Sikh narrator and his beloved Bhagmati jaunt the reader to popular historical spots and provides a chance to the narrator to recreate the history of Delhi; that is also the history of India. Bhagmati represents the present but her curiosity helps him to link the past and the present, and the history of Delhi emerges unobtrusively. In fact, she serves as an intrinsic chain in the historical narration of Delhi’s past. The novelist refers to the tradition of Qawwali singing at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya. It is another interesting feature continuing till today in the material culture. Thus there are new features coming up, but a good part of the old order manages to remain, getting fused into the modernity.

Passion for poetry has been a dominant trait of most of the Muslim rulers. Urdu poetry known for its sensuous appeal exercised a great influence on them. Khushwant Singh himself being a lover of Urdu poetry has made numerous references to this in his novel. He has quoted the verses of MirTaqi Mir and Ghalib. Ghalib is shown as a contemporary of Bahadur Shah Zafar. The novel begins with an epigram by Ghalib: “I asked my soul what is Delhi? She replied: The world is the body and
Delhi its life”. (DAN) Musaddi Lal is shown to be uttering verses to portray Muslim women’s beauty; and it reaches the zenith of sensuality. In their article titled “A Socio-Cultural Study of Delhi by Khushwant Singh and Twilight in Delhi by Ahmed Ali: A Comparative Analysis”, M. Shahbaz Arif and Hina Gull state: “Poetry has been a successful source of presenting the beliefs, values, sentiments and intellectual history of this soil.”(10)

That the history of Delhi is a mix of communal confluence as well as communal clashes and disharmony is shown in the novel. It delineates socio-political setting with historic-political characters. The novel elaborates on the past events and their impact. It also portrays the society and its social mores. It ends with a heart-rending description of anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The mad mob fury is described in detail to emphasise the insanity of the mindless killing of innocent Sikh men, women and children.

The novelist presents the life of Delhi as a saga of history, romance and sex. Muslim culture has been enjoying pre-eminent status in all spheres of life for almost a millennium in and around Delhi. The epicurean way of living by the Muslim rulers has always fascinated the people as well as historians. In free and secular India its remnants are predominant and remind the visitors to Delhi of the opulence of its rulers and also the power game indulged in by many to reign over it and the consequent sufferings and ordeals undergone by the ordinary people of Delhi.

Critic after critic has lavished praise on Khushwant Singh for his work Delhi: A Novel terming it as a portrayal of an epic journey of a city. “A journey in which he reveals a long range of characters with their specific dispositions, historical facts, socio-political issues and religio-cultural upheavals” (Tikait 32). The novelist, indeed, has depicted the material and non-material aspects of culture of Delhi in their
true colours. He has “left no stone unturned to show the world that how rich this soil has been in all spheres of life and also the damage which has been caused to her at all levels by the domestic as well as foreign rulers.” (Shahbaz 11)

Historicity of Delhi, “hystericity” of religious fanatics, delightful descriptions of Delhi, the plight of transgenders and the vulnerable society transgressing ethical and moral standards, patriotic fervour to banish a foreign ruler, the impossibility for finding a solution to the ever elusive Hindu--Muslim divide: all these form the crux of the novel Delhi – A Novel.

The first insightful and interesting historical episode in Khushwant Singh’s work Delhi – A Novel introduces a character namely Musaddi Lal. An imaginary character, a common personage of his times, he serves the novelist to portray the historicity of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Using the first person narrative Khushwant Singh makes Musaddi Lal his mouthpiece and brings out the horrendous impact of the invasion of Mohammed Ghori. The speaker is also made vehemently recall the agonies he suffered in the hands of religious fanatics. It will be of interest to note here that the social reality of the times is poignantly presented through the first person narrative. It adds to the verisimilitude of the never-ending and ever-continuing religious discord and its terrible consequence on the innocent people like Musaddi Lal. The tyranny and regressive practices of the fanatical bigots created a kind of apathy and uncertainty among common personages such as Musaddi Lal who could not easily align themselves with the fanatical groups.

Musaddi Lal was a victim of fanatically inclined social forces. He presents his experiences as a new convert to Islam. He was not recognized either as a Hindu or as a Muslim by the other people. He was treated like a transgender. Basically a Hindu, he was disowned by the Hindus. His wife shunned him and considered him a Muslim
maleeca (untouchable). Not knowing to which community he belonged, he celebrated both Hindu and Muslim festivals. Perhaps, the novelist portrays Musaddi Lal in the light of secularism. Khushwant Singh, himself a staunch champion of secularism, reveals and reinforces his faith in secularism through the character of Musaddi Lal. The cruelties inflicted on Musaddi Lal by the non-secular forces are highlighted through this imaginary character, whose plight is really pathetic.

At the outset of his narration, Musaddi Lal, tracing his lineage to Hindu Kayastha, claims that his ancestors served Raja Anangpul (who built LalKot and erected an iron pillar of Vishnu) and Raja Prithvi Raj Chauhan. The fight for supremacy and the throne was the order of the day. Mohammed Ghori killed Prithvi Raj to become the ruler. Musaddi Lal speaks highly of the valour of Prithvi Raj Chauhan, who ruled Delhi in the 12th century. Prithvi Raj defeated Ghori in 1191. Being a true valorous hero, he magnanimously spared the life of Ghori. But the very next year, King of Delhi was defeated and slain by the same Ghori. Thus, the Turkish invasion paved the way for the foundation of Islamic rule in Hindustan.

In spite of the odds being against them, the Hindus found the way not only for survival but also for excellence and improved their social status. With their knowledge of Turki, Arabic and Persian, they found their way into the court for gainful employment. The bigoted Sultan Qutubuddin destroyed Hindu and Jain Temples and established the tower of victory – Qutub Minar. Musaddi Lal’s grandfather did odd jobs like digging earth for Shamsi Talab, believed to have imprints of the Prophet’s horse (Buraq). His father Lala Chagan Lal served as a clerk in the reign of mighty Sultan Ghiasuddin Balban. Like his father, he too was trained to be a scribe (Kayastha).
Then Musaddi Lal is made to recall his childhood and his marriage to Ram Dulari of Mathura. Musaddi Lal says that he was the only child of his parents. He was betrothed to a girl named Ram Dulari from a family of seven. The family lived in Mathura. Their marriage was solemnized as per the Hindu religious rites when Musaddi Lal was barely nine and his wife Ram Dulari only seven. After four years, as per the custom that was in vogue during that time, Ram Dulari was invited by Musaddi Lal’s parents to join them for leading a conjugal life with Musaddi Lal, but Ram Dulari’s parents refused to send her suspecting that Musaddi Lal’s family had embraced Islam. Grieved over this, Musaddi Lal’s father and mother passed away, leaving Musaddi Lal alone in the world.

Pitied over the sudden death of Musaddi Lal’s parents one after the other, the Kotwal Sahib of Mehrauli offered Musaddi Lal his father’s post. Musaddi Lal’s Muslim friends advised him that his conversion to Islam would brighten his future prospects. Musaddi Lal, the linguist, was illtreated by some Muslims. He was christened Abdul, to be saved from being bullied. He expressed his loneliness and sadness to the Kotwal Sahib of Mehrauli. On the advice of the Kotwal Sahib, Musaddi Lal gave a complaint to the Kotwal Sahib of Mathura about his wife’s refusal to live with him. After a week, Ram Dulari came to Mehrauli to join Musaddi Lal. She lived in the same house but keeping distance from her husband.

The tradition-soaked woman Ram Dulari wore vermilion on the parting of hair, touched her husband’s feet at will and veiled her face with a dupatta. Her behaviour was that of a typical devout Hindu wife, yet she avoided conjugal relationship. She preferred taking food in utensils brought by her. According to her, Musaddi Lal alias Abdul was a Muslim *maleecha*. Dulari shuddered even at the thought of entering Qutub Minar, when her husband took her to that place.
Then Kayasta Musaddi Lal speaks about Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. Ghazni, who after an unsuccessful 17-time invasion, finally succeeded in demolishing Somnath Temple. His treasury was full of severed fingers of Hindu kings. He called himself the right hand of God and the Shadow of God on earth. Fearing Ghazni, Hindus embraced Islam in large numbers. Protesters were made to prostrate before him. Hindus were made to bask on past glory and live in servility by force. Brahmins lived on Yagams, Rajputs on lands, Aahirs and Gujar on cattle, Banias on merchandise and poor Kayasthas on their brains. Unable to withstand the onslaught of Sultans, Musaddi Lal alias Abdul went to Ghiaspur to be blessed by Guru Nizamuddin. People began to pour in for the Guru’s benevolence. They called him auliya (prophet). But many learned Muslims called him an imposter. He was accused of heresy. A complaint was lodged against Nizamuddin by the ulema to the Sultan.

Nizamuddin’s defence of his actions to the Sultan makes a convincing reading. He replied to the charges in the following words:

Mighty Sultan, it is true that I do not make any distinction between Mussalmans and Hindus as I consider both to be the children of God. The ulema exhorts your majesty in the name of the Holy Messenger (upon Whom be peace) to destroy temples and slay infidels to gain merit in the eyes of Allah. I interpret the sacred law differently. I believe that the best way to serve God is through love of his creatures… The ulema know not that God often manifests himself in His creatures. They also do not know that Allah cannot be understood through knowledge of books…God is an experience. (56)

Convinced of the genuineness of his feelings, the Sultan dismissed the ulema’s charges against Nizamuddin. His philosophy suits best the multi-religious Indian
society. Khushwant Singh seems to advocate liberalism and not rigidity, which is the need of the hour. This portrait of Nizamuddin helps the novelist propound his egalitarian views and acceptance of Sufism. Nizamuddin is, indeed, shown as a symbol of religious tolerance and an advocate of harmony during the times of religious turbulence.

Then Musaddi Lal describes the episode that led to the blossoming of conjugal life between him and his wife Ram Dulari. He gratefully remembers the impact Guru Nizamuddin’s words had on Ram Dulari. He also states how his predictions came true, leading to the birth of their son. Ram Dulhari’s transformation and acceptance of Sufi saint’s holiness and the family’s acceptance of both the religions, in fact, highlight the novelist’s acceptance of secularism.

Ram Dulari and I became members of a community which worshipped both in Hindu temples and in Sufi hospices. We celebrated Hindu festivals as well as Muslim. At Dassehra, we went to see Ram Lila, on Diwali we lit oil-lamps on the parapet of our house, at Holi we squirted coloured water on our Hindu friends. On Id we exchanged gifts with Muslims we knew; on the death anniversaries of Muslims saints we went to the mausoleum of Qutubuddin Bakthiyar Kaki. And at least once a month we went to Ghiaspur and watched the sky at dusk to see if the new born moon had risen. (61)

The novelist has introduced this episode to reinstate his faith in religious tolerance. To indicate his acceptance of both the religions, Musaddi Lal remarks that he named his son as “Kamal”. Kamal in Hindi meant “lotus” and with a longer accent on the second “a” it meant “excellence” in Arabic. As Musaddi Lal was blessed with a progeny as predicted by Guru Nizamuddin, he remembered his Guru with utmost
reverence and gratitude. He proclaims that Guru is more than one’s parents as the Guru receives the highest respect from his disciples. This episode comes to an end with the apt words uttered by Musaddi Lal “the Guru is the embodiment of god on earth”. With unassailable faith Musaddi Lal adored Saint Nizamuddin as the real Saviour who protected him and lakhs and lakhs of hapless people like him from “the burning sun of Muslim bigotry and the downpour of Hindu contempt”. (62)

The novelist’s heart rending account of Balban grieving over the untimely death of his eldest son Prince Mohammed in a fight with the Mongols and the consequent death of Balban whose very name evoked fear and terror in others make historical facts into a potent literary artifact. The emotional touch in the description adds to the narrative strategy adopted by the fictionist.

Sultan Ghiasuddin Balban’s eldest son, Prince Mohammed, was killed fighting the Mongols. The mighty Sultan who had ruled Hindustan for twenty-two years with an iron hand wept like a woman. He would not eat or sleep or attend to the affairs of the state. He fell ill but would not allow the royal physician to feel his pulse. In a few days he was reduced to a skeleton- and died. (63)

In the chapter titled “The Timurid”, the novelist introduces a personage from history and makes him speak about the Islamic invasion. The opening of this chapter arrests the attention of the readers as it refers to a dream and the interpretation of the dream by the saintly Shaikh Zainuddin Abu Bakr Tatyabady. It kindles the curiosity of the readers and the artistry of the novelist gets an upper hand and bland historical facts get transmuted into art-- a piece of literature. Enthused by this dream and its interpretation by the saint, Taimur decided to capture Hindustan which according to him “through its disorders had opened its gates to us”. (96) He says: “Our horoscope
had promised that we would be superior to all monarchs of the age, we would protect
religion, destroy idols…” (96). He was lame and people called him Taimurlang
(Taimur the lame) behind his back, but in his presence addressed him “as the
Uncompared Lord of Seven Climes and the Lord of Fortunate Conjunction.” (96)

The first person narrative of Taimur increases its credibility and only
difference between Musaddi Lal and Taimur is that the former uses ‘‘I’’ in his
narration, whereas the latter uses ‘‘We’’. In fact, Taimur speaks as a representative of
his clan; and the novelist carefully avoids monotony of repetition. The use of “We”
adds charm to the narration and lends objectivity to some extent. Before allowing
Taimur to speak, the Sikh narrator takes the reader to the present and speaks as a
tourist guide. He is with his beloved Bhagmati.

The Sikh narrator tells the reader that one must have the idea of Pre-Mughal,
Mughal and Post-Mughal periods of reign to appreciate historical monuments. He
makes a reference to the popular Muslim ruler Tughlakh and the historical sites
associated with him. Sultan Tughlakh known for his mercurial temperament had
established Tughlakhabad, some distance away from Lado Sarai. The red Citadel was
enveloped by red walls. Siri, a tank, catering to the people was a boon. A madarasa of
repute was the seat of learning to the aspirants. Now the remnants of these
monuments are great attractions to the tourists. As expected, the tourist spot was full
of Jat people with lovely physical contours crowding the travellers. Young boys were
vying to win the attention of the Sikh narrator and Bhagmati proclaiming themselves
as guides. The Sikh narrator, himself a guide, drove them away.

Very interesting description of the present Delhi by the novelist catches the
attention of the reader. Snake-enchanters are many with their proven crafts. The
chirping birds and the bathing buffaloes remind one of the tanks that once existed.
Children, ladies and monkeys jiggled at Bhagmati. Tughlakhabad was a busy beehive for bees belonging to Apis species. Even now, the busy bees, when disturbed by urchins of the area, retaliate with their stings. The narrator, as a victim, was no exception. He, along with Bhagmati, fled the place to take asylum in a common ward in the nearby Lohia Hospital. Sensing that bee-stings, if not attended to immediately, might become fatal, he urged the doctors for priority in treatment. Unmindful of the urgency of a bee-stung case, the doctor, non-challantly attended to a phone call of no significance. The high-sounding English words of lodging a complaint against the irresponsible member of the noblest profession of healing had a magical effect. The narrator narrowly escaped the jaws of death. The word “death” makes him shudder at the thought of human massacre by the tyrant, Taimur. This is a clue to take the reader to the past.

The Turks dreamt of spreading Islam to all parts of the world and invaded Hindustan to put an end to the idol worship of Hindus and to bring the infidels under the umbrella of one God, Allah. They did not spare even their own Muslim brethren not to talk of resisting Hindu Rajas. Thus dawned Thymurian dynasty of rulers followed by Ghors, Ghiasudin Balban and Tughlaks over a period of two centuries. The greed of gold coupled with dreams of Islamic State all over the world made the narrow-minded Turks invade Delhi. Sultan Firoze Tughlak spent more time in raising mosques, madarasas and canals for the welfare of people opposed to the insurging Turks.

Some blacksheep like Sarang Khan and Mallu Khan Iqbal were stumbling blocks to the good intention of the Muslim rulers in India. In the course of wars that ensued, many were massacred. The Turks crossed Delhi and Punjab. Some local Muslims connived with the invaders to demolish monuments like Ashok Pillar at
Firozabad or Kotla. Many were beheaded. Mohammed Tughlak amassed a huge army to oppose. Armoured archers and engaged elephants notwithstanding were smashed by the sudden onslaught of invaders. Camels were a threat to advancing elephant-caravan. People surrendered at Siri, Mehrauli, Jahanapanah and submitted their turbans and caps to embrace Holy Islam. The entire tombs in the mosques were full of prayers from Quran. Hindu craftsmen were drafted to carve out Qutub Minar. Sermons were sung and contests were held to commemorate the historic event. Ladies and gentlemen prayed at the mosque by the side of Shamsi Talab. The subjugated Hindus fled Sivi, Mehrauli and Jahanapanah with their possessions. The idols of Hindu Gods were smashed despite the entreaties of Hindu priests. Many places in Delhi and Punjab were full of pestilence with unburied bodies of the dead. Owls, jackals and hyenas were on the prowl. Even Allah could not bear with this bloodshed and atrocities of Turkish invaders. Detailed delineations on sexual subjects invariably followed by delightful delineations on serious subjects are the hall-marks of Khushwant Singh.

As mentioned earlier, the scene alternates between the past and the present, but yet the focus is clearly on the historicity of Delhi. The scene now turns to the present and the narrator gives a vivid portrayal of the Republic Day Parade. The presentation affords an opportunity to tell the present generation about the sacrifices made by some of the heroic figures of the freedom struggle, the unique composite culture of India seen in different regions of the country and also the modern developments in the field of defence. The novelist regales the readers with a detailed description of the Republic Day festivities in Delhi.

Despite biting winter, people, wrapped in woolen shawls, wind their way from early morning to ramparts of Red Fort to see the historical hoisting of the Tri-
colour Flag to be unfurled by the Prime Minister. The non-violence of Gandhiji, the
Chief Architect of our freedom, and the modern edifice erected by Chacha Pandit
Nehruji are the much-admired subjects of the people with patriotic fervour. The
matchless march-past of the guards of our frontiers of the three divisions of the
defence force is to be seen to be believed. The people are aghast at the gliding,
spiralling and somersaulting planes leaving behind streaks of tri-coloured smoke.

People leave the Parliament campus only after the Retreating Ceremony in the
evening. Foreign delegates become part and parcel of the Indian Public and enjoy
everything including the parade depicting the different cultures of different States of
the Indian Dominion. A visit to Cannaught Place and Rajpath has become a
pilgrimage to Delhiwalas year after year.

The narrator longs to be associated with the Government by being recognised
as a National guide to the visiting Diplomats of either sex. He turns an honest penny
out of his chosen, cherished avocation. The visiting dignitaries, especially the young
eves are enticed by him through his exquisite explanations of historical places and
personalities and his rougish advances made during the journeys. An American
tourist, Georgine is wonderstruck at his descriptions of the parental anxiety of Father
Babar, ready to be the recipient of the disease of his beloved son, Humayun Khabir,
through fervent prayers. The narrator presents a miniature of the Taj to her. Though
she admires the gifts and the mementos, she leaves the attic of the narrator when she
smells the dubious role of her guide. This shows that this man is a mixture of good
and bad designs.

The narrator leaves Delhi and returns after a long stay abroad. When the
narrator returns after a long time, Delhi presents the same old stinky suburbs and
stately metropolis. The Railway station, an Eldorado to all, at any time is buzzing
with activities of vendors selling their merchandise. The platforms look now to some extent renovated and the notice boards pasted with train itineraries. Yet Delhi would not be Delhi under the new garb but be itself with the garbages heaped.

At the same time, the subsequent chapters depicting delightful description of architectural aroma of Mughal dynasties and their strict adherence to the more serious subjects would sustain an ardent reader. An indelible impression left behind by the legacy of Muslim monarchs need not be over-emphasised. The majestic marble mausoleum stands ravages of time to be the Taj, one of the wonders of the world. Though Aldous Huxley brushes aside the magnificent marvel as “marble and marble and marble alone”, that covers multitude of sins in architecture, yet the viewers are aghast at the dedication of the Emperor, Shah Jahan, to his paragon of beauty, Mumtaz. The edifice embodies the sleeping beauty in undisturbed slumber. Agra attracts tourists to have a glimpse of the resplendent memorial reflected by the moonlit river Jamna or Yamuna. This takes the viewer to the bygone era and reminds the reader of Aurangzeb, the son of Shah Jahan.

The eighth chapter of the novel with the title “The Untouchables” presents a moving account of the life led by a group of people from the lower rungs of society. The pitiable predicament of the untouchables during the reigns of Shah Jahan and his son Aurangzeb is highlighted through the portrayal of the incidents from a single untouchable’s life. The title in plural indicates the entire clan’s miserable life. The society’s attitude towards these unfortunate lot is presented without any slant by the novelist.

The narrator of this section is Jaita Rangreta who reveals his name proudly after doing his duty to his Guru. The nameless narrator is made to reveal his name only in the last line of the chapter. He called himself a Sikh of Guru Nanak. Some of
the untouchables aptly called themselves as the Sikhs of Guru Nanak, as this Guru advocated and stood for an egalitarian society. But most of the Sikhs and people of other religions did not consider the so-called untouchables as brethren and treated them as obnoxious beings.

That no one treated these people in a dignified manner is shown through this episode. “Near the place of worship but far away from God” was perhaps the “principle” adhered to by many practitioners of religious rituals. But they called themselves religious-minded people. The novelist while ridiculing this continuing tradition exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called religious people of all sects and hues. The followers of Sikhism were no exception to this during the time of Muslim rulers. The Sikhs, who swore by the words of Guru, perpetrated all kinds of discriminations on the untouchables or the Sikhs of Guru Nanak.

It may be noted here that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, abhorred all kinds of discriminations and advocated a unifying faith. His teachings and songs reveal the influence of Hinduism and Islam on him. The holy book “Granth Sahib” contains the hymns of both Hindu and Muslim saints. From Islam he took the idea of rejection of idolatry and the caste system. The teachings of Muslim Sufi Sheik Farid and Kabir influenced Guru Nanak in his formative years. But unfortunately his followers did not care for the unifying principles advocated by the Guru.

The narrator Jaita Rangreta says that he and his clan eked out a poor living by sweeping drains, cleaning latrines, carrying shit and stinking carcasses. The irony, he avers, was that he and his people who kept the environment clean for a healthy living of others were considered “unclean” by people. They, being economically down-trodden, were forced to eat “leftover food”. Their service to humanity was never thought of by people. Even while the novelist focuses on the untouchables, he brings
in great historical events and incidents of the times in the form of the narrator’s recollection and presents them in their true form and features.

The narrator says that when Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh was captured by Aurangzeb, people believed that a miracle would be performed by him in order to escape from the clutches of the tyrant. The narrator Jaita Rangreta too, like others, believed that the Guru would perform some miracle. But it did not happen. The Guru was executed. “With the name of god on his lips, he permitted the monster Jalaluddin Samana to sever his head from his body.” (134) The king ordered for the exposure of the dead body for public gaze. The entire Sikh community felt outraged by the atrocities of the tyrant. But the minority Sikh community could not oppose the mighty king. “The men sighed and the women wept. The Mussalmans of the sarai watched us from a distance. Even they seemed to be touched by our grief.” (134)

Being a true Sikh of Guru Nanak, Jaita Rangreta was enraged by this horrendous deed of Aurangzeb.

My blood boiled within me; I felt very hot and angry with myself. Most of the Guru’s disciples were high-born Kshatriyas and Jat peasants who boasted loudly of their bravery. They had done nothing to save their Guru. I, an untouchable, could teach these high-caste fellows how a Guru’s Sikh should act. It might cost me my life, but I would win the respect of the world for my untouchable brethren.(135)

He says that he firmly decided to do something. He embarked on the mission of kidnapping the body of the Guru to give it a decent burial. Without uttering a word, he plunged in to action. When Jaita Rangreta reached the Kotwali to lift the mortal remains of his Guru, a furious dust storm raged and this helped him to take the body
and the head without being noticed by other people. He carried the body on his shoulders and with the help of Lakhi Rai and his sons he laid the Guru’s body to rest.

I had no difficulty in finding the Guru’s body. I touched his feet and then slung his body over my shoulders. I took his head in my hands and walked through the blinding dust storm. Lakhi Rai and his sons also touched the Guru’s feet. We laid his body and head on one of the bullock carts, piled bales of cotton over it and turned over carts around …. When we arrived at Rikabganj, … the night had come on. Lakhi Rai’s wife … had made a pyre of sandalwood in the centre of their courtyard. We placed the Guru’s body on it… Lakhi Rai said a short prayer and lit the pyre. (136)

After this, the storm vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. Jaita Rangreta felt happy as he could perform his duty to the Guru as a true Sikh of Guru Nanak. He was proud and deemed it an honour conferred on him by the departed Guru. “At last the Guru had performed the great miracle. He had given a carrier of shit and stinking carcasses the privilege of carrying his sacred head in his arms” (136). The nameless narrator proudly concludes his account by disclosing his name: “I was now Jaita Rangreta the true son of the Guru” (136) Thus he is made to realise his self worth and dignity.

Even while the novelist focuses on the lives of the untouchables, he brings in details about the historical figures intrinsically connected with Delhi. Through Rangreta’s father the reader is made to know about the character of Shah Jahan. He says that Shah Jahan boasted himself the ruler of the world but he deviously ascended the throne after killing all the members of his brothers’ families. He showed his weakness for women and wine like his father, grandfather and great grandfather.
Rangreta makes a reference to the construction of Taj Mahal by Shah Jahan in memory of his favourite queen Mum Taj. He also makes a mention of the king’s love for Delhi and his construction of a massive fort and the biggest mosque in Delhi. By his concrete contribution to Delhi he, perhaps, wished to make it as Shahjahanabad. Rangreta acknowledges how the construction work provided sustenance to the poor people like the untouchables and Shah Jahan gave silver coins generously to the poor people of Delhi. Thus he earned the respect of poor people.

Interestingly Rangreta gives an outline of Aurangzeb’s ascension to the throne of Delhi. That how the sons of Shah Jahan fought among themselves for the throne and how Aurangzeb succeeded in the power game are hinted at by the narrator. About Aurangzeb the Mussalmans of the period said:

They said that the new badshah was a good man. He did not drink wine; he did not have concubines or courtesans; he did not allow dancing and singing in the palace; he ate little, slept little and prayed a lot. He spent on himself only what he earned by making copies of their holy book and selling them. They said if all kings had been like him, Hindustan would have long ago been rid of Kafirs. Alamgir was the name they used for him – ‘Alamgir, Zinda Peer, is a living saint,’ they said. (130).

The Hindus did not like Aurangzeb as he had imposed Jazia tax on them. He destroyed many Hindu temples at Varanasi and Mathura. He blew up a village named Tilpat inhabited by the Jats and Brahmans. He also killed thousands of Sadhus belonging to a sect called Satnamis. The slaining of the Sikh Guru by Aurangzeb led to the pathological hatred for the Muslims by the Sikh people. Thus this novel has definite bearing on the actual events that occurred in Delhi and its neighbourhood.
The account on Aurangzeb Alamgir reads like an interesting mini autobiography. At the opening lines Aurangzeb says that he has penned this true sketch of himself to correct the distorted versions presented by historians about his life and deeds. He assures the reader that he has presented nothing but facts and vouchsafes this in the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Merciful. It is be noted here that Musaddi Lal and Taimur are made to speak by the novelist but in the case of Aurangzeb he is made to write about his life. About his birth he states in all humility. “This sinner full of iniquities was born in 1027 Hijri (1618) in Dohar to Shah Jahan Emperor of Hindustan and Mumtaz Begum.

Fourteen children were born to the royal pair of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz in fourteen years of happy conjugation. While seven were summoned to paradise, surviving seven—Jahanara, Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Roshanara Begum, Aurangzeb Alamgir, Murad and Gauhar Ara—were taken care of by grandfather, Emperor Jehangir. Aurangzeb referring to his birth says, “This creature of dust was the fifth surviving child and the third son of our parents.” (145) The children were imparted lessons in royal sports like wielding the saber, mounting the steeds, riding the elephants as well as in spiritual subjects by hakims.

The emperor wanted to assess the prowess of his grandchildren. He had abundant faith in the fifth grandchild, Aurangzeb, despite his infirmity. He was impressed by the ever-glowing spiritual fire that made him stand head and shoulders above his brothers. Naturally, other siblings like Dara and Murad, owing to brewing animosity over Aurangzeb, carried tales to their grandfather, but in vain. The grandfather was convinced of the way in which Aurangzeb quelled the elephants Sudhakar and Sundar that trampled some by running amuck. No wonder, Aurangzeb, himself considered it his duty to denounce those who wanted to distort his credentials.
to the throne. Result! Siblings became staunch haters. They joined hands with infidels like Rajputs and Jats. This necessitated Aurangzeb to take cudgels against them. What followed was the massacre of the siblings and depicting the severed heads in public places.

There is a popular adage that stresses the idea “In kingship there is no place for kinship”. This is well illustrated through the lives of Muslim rulers who indulged in power game. In fact, power corrupts people beyond imagination. Aurangzeb is made to recall the stories of rulers who had killed their own kith and kin in order to retain their power. Aurangzeb justifies his action of killing his brothers by recalling the history of the Mughals. He says he was only an instrument of God’s designs and all his actions were for the good of the empire and the Mughals.

Our great ancestor Zahiruddin Babar had laid the foundation stone of the empire in Hindustan in 1562. His two sons, Humayun and Kamran, had then drawn their swords against each other. Allah had granted the throne to Humayun and so he took the light out of the eyes of his brother and sent him off to Mecca to die. When Akbar succeeded Humayun, he disposed of Kamran’s only son. Likewise Emperor Akbar’s reign was disturbed by the revolt of his beloved son Salim Jahangir – who in his turn had to keep his own impatient son Khusrau in confinement. The same fate had befallen our father who had also to suffer his sons Dara Shikoh and ourselves being taken hostage. When Allah bestowed the empire of Hindustan on our father, he was compelled to remove his own brothers Dawar Baksh and Shahryar along with male progeny. Truly does the prophet Jeremiah say:
“Father has eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are on edge.”

(153)

Then he writes how he took vengeance on the charlatan Sarmad who prophesied the crown to Dara Shikoh. After he became the emperor, he ordered Sarmad’s execution in front of the Royal Mosque in full view of the populace. He destroyed temples of idolatry to dust and raised mosques on their ruins. He admits that he ravaged the lands of Marathas and forcefully converted people to Islam. He imposed Jazia on people who refused to embrace Islam. He persecuted people who opposed his tyranny and in short his reign was marked by bloodshed. His cruel deeds only invoked repulsion and hatred among non-Muslims. He imprisoned his father who was taken ill in early January 1666. As per his father’s wish he was kept near Taj Mahal and he passed away on January 22 gazing at the Taj Mahal with the name of Allah on his lips. To quote Aurangzeb “he passed out of this world into paradise.” (158) At the same time, such a person did not like to disturb ordinary people who came to mosques for prayers and he built a small mosque and named it Moti Masjid and without disturbing others he spent many hours in prayers.

Of his terrible cruel deeds, Aurangzeb refers to the execution of his brother Dara Shikoh who pleaded for a house to live in and promised Aurangzeb that he would devote his life in retreat to praying for his brother’s good. He admits that with heavy heart he signed the warrant of death and at that time he reminded himself that kingship knows no kinship. He also mentions how he apprehended Dara’s son Sulaiman Shikho from his hideout and brought him in chains to Delhi. He was imprisoned at Gwalior Fort and was executed.

In kingship, there is no kinship or place for compassion. The history of Akbar, Humayun, Kabir, Babar, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb prove the above view. After
leading a life of austerity, the emperor was at the end of the road with inexplicable and excruciating pain in the stomach. Notwithstanding high medical attention, the emperor embraced the inevitable. During his regime, he taxed the infidels, idolaters, prevented the fair sex from having equal rights and abhorred music and dance with the sole aim of establishing Muslim dynasty.

Aurangzeb gives an emotional touch when talks about his old age: and his waiting to embrace the inevitable. To his son Azam, he writes: “I came alone and I go as a stranger. I do not know who I am nor what I have been doing.” (162) He feels that he has squandered his life. He writes to his another son Kam Baksh:

Soul of my soul… I am going alone. I grieve for your helplessness: but what is the use? Every torment I have inflicted, every sin I have committed, every wrong I have done, I carry its consequences with me. Strange that I came into the world with nothing and now I am going away with this stupendous caravan of sin! Whenever I look, I see only God… I have sinned terribly and I do not know what punishment awaits me…” (162)

The novelist makes the reader confront a remorseful Aurangzeb through the adoption of interior monologue. The interior monologue is a powerful strategy adopted by the novelist to portray the inner states of the mind of the speaker which torments him for his earlier sins. It is here that history becomes literature.

Though the next chapter is titled “Bhagmati”, he presents the plight of the Sikh narrator and thus helps the reader to get relief from the highly emotion-packed narration of the previous chapter. The reader is taken to the present Delhi. Heavier vein to lighter vein, the Sikh narrator considers his life at Delhi sometimes a
nightmarish experience. Though he has not seen any ghost, he wants to overcome “ghostophobia” by visiting cremation grounds and graveyards. From the transitory strengthened nerve in the day, the approach of nights to be spent alone inside his flat with not even company to be given by Bhagmati, the ghosts loom large and frighten him.

Once, he happened to visit his ailing uncle with a severe bout of asthma. He finds relatives praying and the wife of the patient waiting patiently to receive the heavy phlegm in a spittoon. The uncle, disinterested to acknowledge the arrival of his nephew, thought it wise to call it a day. A gloom descended the room, with the wife hysterically affected by the pangs of separation from her life partner. Consolation aggravated her still.

After the rituals were over, the narrator returned to his flat and asked Budh Singh to arrange for a couch under the open air to escape stuffy atmosphere inside the room due to AC failure. Unable to sleep, he went around the graveyards full of royal souls of Mughals and Lodhis interred. He thought that the Mughals deserved epitomes with epitaphs, as Lodhis like Ibrahim Lodhi lived more in Agra than in Delhi and suffered defeat at the hands of Muslim monarchs like Babar at Panipet. Yet, the lovely Sikandar Lodhi’s tomb was attractive. As time passed, the nerve of the narrator failed. The fear of ghosts began to haunt him. Morning dawned. Yoga classes were on from the early morning. The living world was on the anvil. The ghostly world of the imaginary ghosts and the dead melted into thin air. The narrator was relieved to a great extent. The reader of the novel is also mentally prepared to go back to the past in the following chapter. This chapter serves as a fitting interlude, sparing the reader the jerk of sudden change from Aurangzeb to Nadir Shah.
Throughout comical it is not emotion charged. In a way the continuity is also maintained through the description of tombs.

The section 12 titled as “Nadir Shah” begins with a dream sequence. Nadir Shah is an important historical figure revivified by the novelist. He was the ruler of Isphaham who later became the emperor of Iran. One of the bloodiest monarchs from Iran who plundered the wealth of Delhi justifies his actions in his own way. He is the narrator. And this plunderer-despot says that his aim was to save Hindustan from the infidel Marathas. Most of the Muslim inhabitants were convinced that his mission was to save the country from heathens and restore Islam to its rightful place. But he was greedy and hid his avarice under the garb of religion.

The strange dream encountered by Nadir Shah is elaborated at the outset of this section and this section also describes how the interpretation of it by a seer helped him expand his dominion. The account begins with a philosophical musing on dreams. It is true that sometimes dreams come true. It is an instance of dream coming true. Dreams are natural for a royal personage as also for an ordinary day-dreaming peasant. God bestows both with dreams of different nature. An emperor spends a lavish day with power in the Day, with nightmarish dreams of assassination and treachery at Night. For an ordinary man, it is an uneventful and ordinary Day full of labour, while the Night presents him with colourful dreams of pleasure and treasure. This is how God metes out justice equal to all. “Thus does Allah dispense justice; to one man He gives pleasure by day, misery by night; to another He gives travail from sunrise to sunset, the joys of paradise from sunset to sunrise” (168). Though this generalization is no way near the truth, it serves the purpose in the narration, showing that the dreams of the emperor act as his nemesis, while the commoner is rewarded with joy after his sufferings in the day.
After this musing, Nadir Shah talks about his arduous journey to Hindustan with a battalion of soldiers. As mentioned earlier the narrator is Nadir Shah himself but instead of using “I” he uses the pronoun “we” throughout the narration. In Eastern culture people from higher rungs of society use “we” in the place of “I” to lend sophistication and objectivity. Here the narrator uses “we” to indicate his aristocratic lineage and the nobility of his race and religion. When he uses “we”, he identifies himself with his loyal and valiant troops which accompanied him in his long hazardous journey to Hindustan from Iran. It is also indicative of his kindness and love for his loyal subjects. It adds intensity to the gripping narrative. Only in two chapters, Khushwant Singh has employed this narrative technique.

The narrator says that one day, when he was in deep sleep he found himself shepherding the flocks of his father’s goats. He saw himself sleeping on a couch of sand. He had a queer dream. He found himself elevated to the position of a fisherman. He got a bounty of fish with four horns. Unable to fathom the real sense of this non-sensible dream, he had the explanation from a seer that drove him into raptures, as the fish in the dream was a royal emblem and the four horns prophesying four dominions to be ruled by him. Already with three dominions under his belt, namely Ishphahan, Iran and Afghanistan, he is haunted by the thought of Hindustan (Delhi). Another dream of the glittering Zulfiquar adorning his waist proclaimed the surging world of fortune in the form of an epistle not from Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah, the emperor of Hindustan at Delhi, but from two of his ‘trusted’ noblemen, Nizam-ul-Mulk and Saadath Khan. Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah, the Mughal emperor who had sealed the commerce with Iran, was acting like all arrogance personified paying scant respect for the heads of other states. Nizam-ul-Mulk and Saadath Khan were the two wily reptiles ever ready to bite Nasiruddin Mohamed
Shah. As a reply to their epistle, a strategic letter emanated from Nadir Shah enumerating the various obstacles they might face on the dangerous path, like the serpentaining mountainous terrains like the Hindu Kush, the troubling tribes of Afghans and Pathans and the ill-will of Subedars of Kabul and Lahore, not to talk of a powerful army of Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah.

Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah did not care to send a reply to Nadir Shah’s letter. Nadir Shah was emboldened by the Mughal emperor’s squandering time among wine and women, much against the doctrines of Islam. He wanted to halt the passing of rule to the infidel Marathas. Kandahar, Kabul, Ghazni and the whole of Afghanistan fell to him. He was outspoken in conveying through a letter to Nasiruddin Mohamed Shah that it was his mission of preserving the territory and not his personal enmity to him that made him embark upon this military expedition. Like the winged visitors to the holy flame, Turks, Georgians and Pathans swelled his army in his mission. Yet, there was no response from Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah. Neither Nadir Shah’s ambassadors were allowed from Delhi. Beating the victorious drums, the troops of Nadir Shah wound their way towards Delhi. Biting frost was a real challenge. En route, they were looted of their belongings by the roaming robbers and tricky tribal men. With great difficulty, Nadir Shah and his army arrived at the Khyber Valley, which might turn out to be the trapping net. Amidst this hectic march, they missed not Meghreb prayer. The twinkling stars and the cloudy sky were their track lighters. They could capture Peshawar. They crossed Indus Valley and Punjab. The sun peeped. Green wheat, mustard and sugarcane were a feast of fertility of lands. The abundance of flora arrested their attention. The inhabitants of the villages, mostly Muslims, welcomed them on their mission of maintaining a Mughal empire against infidels. Nadir Shah provided them with gold and silver coins. In turn, they
got provisions to sustain their weary army. Nadir Shah guarded his guards against molesting the Indian women.

Zakarya Khan, the governor of Lahore, who could not withstand Nadir Shah’s onslaught, prostrated at his feet with ransom money. With the onslaught of bright sun rays looming large, he wanted to bring the war to an early halt fearing the summer heat. The strength of ruling Muslim army was enormous but Nadir Shah’s army outsmarted the enemy’s. Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah’s army had a caravan of majestic elephants to form the front line. Nadir Shah’s caravan of camels with naphtha at their back frightened the huge elephants which retreated trampling their own masters in the process. Artillery became dumb-founded.

Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah sent word for a truce. He had his own suspicion of being murdered. Hence, he sent a eunuch with a copy of the Quran to escape assassination. Nadir Shah had the grace to allow him to submit a shawl of surrender. Mohammed Shah was a mute listener when Nadir referred to the errors committed by him unbecoming of a true servant of Allah.

Nadir Shah promised to set things right in Delhi. After a few months of rest, Nadir Shah said that he would call back his fatigued army with compensation of war expenses as promised by Nizam-ul-Mulk. Finally, he promised them that he would restore governance of the capital to Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah and allow him to administer in the Allah-prescribed manner. He said that there cannot be any compromise over it. He insisted that Nasiruddin’s wife and son to be sent as hostages to his camp. He then sent a cavalry to escort the deposed Muslim king. Nadir Shah had his tent amid massive banyan trees. His warriors enjoyed themselves in the mango groves. They relished the juicy mango and mellifluous music of a bird called koel (cuckoo).
Next day, the troops of Nadir Shah entered the city of the Mughals through the gate of Lahori Bazaar. To create a congenial atmosphere, Shah left behind his huge army. Floral arches greeted them with marigolds and jasmine spreading an aroma of fragrance. He passed through a mosque built in memory of one of the Begums of Emperor Shah Jahan. He then passed through Chandni Chowk. The canal with bordering trees enchanted them. Jauhari Bazaar was agog with sales of precious stones. Many of the mosques had been built by money-makers. “There they saw a new mosque built by Nawab Roshan-ud-Daulah, the keeper of Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah’s treasury and they also learnt that the treasury keeper was a notorious bribe-taker” (176). This single sentence throws light on the lack of integrity of the deposed emperor’s keeper. This was the cause for his downfall.

Phool-ki-Mandi was a flower bazaar with multitude of flora. Silver-smiths presented Nadir with stone-studded salvars. Urudu Bazaar was a place allotted for Nadir Shah’s troops. Mughal guns gave Nadir’s troops a rousing reception. In return, Nadir Shah presented shawls of honour. A display of fire-works was on the anvil. Dancing and singing added lustre. To please his host, Nadir Shah accepted a goblet of wine and the prettiest girl-attendant. Her nimble feet out-classed those of the dancing girls. Poetic lores poured in.

To put an end to this celebration, Nadir Shah decided to take rest pointing out to the actual duty of a Mughal King. The slave girl Noor Bai entered the room to smoothen his travel-weary toes. Baring her fully, she was ready to be at his service. His manliness was a match to her feline and feminine advances. When he presented her gold coins and assured to take her into his harem, she refused to move out of Delhi. The territorial affinity of even a child is to be seen to be believed.
Khutba was ordered to be read in all mosques the following day. It is only to reassure the restoration of order in the erstwhile beleaguered Delhi. Nadir Shah was angry with Saadath Khan and his entourage for not offering compensation promised to the warriors on mission. Saadath Khan unwillingly praised Nadir Shah, which necessitated in Nadir Shah chastising him. Unable to bear the chastisement, he plunged a dagger into his bosom that night.

The narrator is Nadir Shah himself but it reads like the notes in a diary. There is absolutely no intrusion by the Sikh narrator of the novel. Nadir Shah speaks freely without hiding anything and the consequent emotional touch on the reader is effective. The invasions and possessions highlighted by the speaker reveal the time, space and history. It also reveals the innate feelings and the strengths and weakness of Nadir Shah who too had a hand in moulding the fate of Delhi.

The people of Delhi did not take kindly to the invading troops as Nadir Shah expected. They refused to realize that Nadir Shah’s troops braved many difficulties to invade Delhi for restoring a real Islamic dominion, instead they thought that it was for gold and money that the Iranians made inroads. There was commotion when the Imams were performing Khutbas. People in Delhi spat on the Iranian guards. The merchants were demanding high prices from the guards. In various ways like these, they invited the angel of death to their city. There were cases of assaults on Iranians. Nadir Shah was given to understand that the trouble brewers were two Pathans -- Niaz Khan and Sheh Sawar Khan. Gun shots were thudding. The streets were strewn with spears and swords. Against the madding crowd, Nadir Shah had to reinforce his guards and mount cannons.

The silence of Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah amidst all these uproarious scenes made Nadir Shah angry. Added to it, Noor Bai entered with a goblet of wine.
Suspecting something wrong he forced her to have a sip. He assured her his help, only if she behaved with gratitude. He spied her on some days to come. Then his troops moved towards Delhi, after having early prayers. Tears trickled down Nadir’s cheeks when he saw the bodies of his comrades and commanders lying strewn all over the battered streets. The flowers showered on him the previous day turned to pelted stones. A bullet shot hit his orderly. The sabers came out of the sheaths and he decided to take revenge on the traitors. They proposed loyalty and then turned traitors. He felt that they flattered him only to betray. As a result, Nadir’s soldiers were on a killing spree till their arms ached. Men, women and children fell to Iranian swords like cards. Nawab Sabuland Khan pleaded with him. Hence, Nadir spared certain areas. He stopped the carnival of revenge and ordered the streets to be cleaned. It was the holy day of Holi with infidels dowsing everybody with red water at the advent of spring. They burned their dead kin while the Muslims buried theirs. The disclaimed bodies were disposed of by kites, vultures, cats, dogs and jackals. Nadir did not want to excuse the miscreants. Nadir looted the shops and plundered. The unrelenting were flogged. The women were molested. Many ended their lives to escape Iranian cruelty. As the waters of Oxus flew into the sea, gold and precious stones filled Nadir’s coffers. Nadir stopped levying interest on Iranians. He started introspecting. As prophesied, he had conquered four kingdoms. He felt that he had served Allah and the Prophet by piercing the hearts of infidels with the spear of Islam. He had amassed wealth. The people of Asia were in awe. People were now mute animals to follow Nadir Shah. They were rich and, at the same time, poor. Nadir Shah was sad at the suspicion he nurtured against the innocent Noor. When she prostrated before him, he slipped a pair of golden bangles into her hands. She had the audacity to disapprove of
his massacre of innocent people in general, showing that in spite of her poverty and helplessness she had love for her land and the courage to defend it in her own way.

Next day, Hakeem Alavikhan arrived to admonish them for their sins. He wanted them to control anger. He said that anger is an incurable disease. Their grounds of conviction were that the atrocities were first perpetrated by the Hindustan Muslim army. The Iranians only retaliated. Hakeem’s question whether this was rule of justice to kill innocent people, made them ashamed. Hakeem’s counsels were sought for mental peace. A calm serenity filled the air. Humour began to flow. They even entered into a connubial alliance with Aurangzeb’s family. Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah, who was a foe, became a friend through a marriage alliance between his son and the daughter of an Iranian ruler. The marriage celebrations provided an opportunity for both sides to forget the frayed tempers and rejoice with new-found relations. Red Fort was lit with lamps. Grand feast of consummation was given.

Every one believed in the proud possession of two invaluable things -- Kohinoor Diamond and Peacock Throne -- studded with precious stones. But their whereabouts were not known. Someone gave information to Nadir that the Kohinoor Diamond was kept hidden in the turban of Mohammed Shah. At the coronation ceremony, the turban was removed and replaced by a new crown. The turbans were exchanged by the Mohammed Shah and Nadir Shah. The turban with hidden diamond was smoothly handed over by Mohammed Shah. Hakeem advised the invaders to go back to Iran. The plundered articles were all mounted on elephants and sent to Iran.

They made arrangements for proper administration of Delhi. Shah and Nizam-ul-Mulk were left with other administrative aspects. They were warned that if they
failed in their duty, the dominion of Delhi would be annexed by the holy Muslim regime of Iran. Hakeem was awarded presents for his outspoken and plain counsels and, Noor for her affectionate attachment to Delhi.

This chapter as narrated by the Muslim ruler of Iran on what he believed was a mission to establish the real Muslim Regime as foreseen by Allah the Prophet, brings out the following facts: Both Indian and Iranian Muslims were known for their unshakable faith in Allah the Prophet. During the course of invasion, the Iranian Muslim King Nadir Shah and his retinue were not for harming women or children. Their wrath was only against infidels. They did not miss enjoying the greenery of forests, the flora and fauna of India and their aesthetic admiration showed them as connoisseurs of art and lovers of Nature. They were proud of possessing the Kohinoor Diamond and the Peacock Throne -- the symbols of superiority of the reigning regime. At moments of spurt, they acted emotionally and massacred. At the end, they rued for their act and shed tears. They were ready to be the recipients of the timely counsels of Hakeem. The Iranian King suspected Noor, a gift given by the ruler of Delhi, for he thought that she might scheme to kill him when she offered wine. Later, he understood her innocence and rewarded her for her sincerity and loyalty. After restoring a modicum of clean administration (by appointing four officers), they left the other administrative aspects to Mohammed Shah and his deputy. In short, it proved the Muslim emperor’s deep religious faith.

Poets by profession enjoyed a place of pride in the ancient Indian social setup, the kings and the nobility patronizing them. Urdu poets enjoyed a high status among the Muslim kings and their chieftains. In every town, there were places called *Mehfils* (a hall meant for entertainment and for recitation of poetry) where the public gathered in large numbers to listen to and enjoy poetry recitation. It has remained a past time
for a long period and this almost became a social institution in the long run. Not only men even Muslim women in veiled apparel were permitted into these Musharias (an evening social gathering at which Urdu poetry was read out). Competitions were held to enthuse aspiring poets; and people gave presents to encourage them. The mellifluous, sensuous and sensual Urdu poetry was indeed a crowd-puller. There are many references to this practice in the chapter titled “Meer Taqi Meer”.

The saying “a woman can make or mar a man’s life” is illustrated in this chapter. Meer Taqi Meer was a renowned Urdu poet who lived during the turbulent times of Persian invasion. He is a historical figure, but not a maker of history. Passion for poetry and an unremitting infatuation for a woman ruled his life. The unrelenting passion for a woman brought about his ultimate ruin. The speaker in this chapter is Meer Taqi Meer himself and at the age of eighty-eight he recounts his pathetic story of lust and poverty in powerful words. The entire chapter running to thirty-eight pages, one of the lengthiest, is couched in poetic-prose with many excerpts from poetry. The reader never feels a dull moment and is mesmerized by the magic of first person account.

This important and interesting chapter reveals not only Khushwant Singh’s originality for spinning a tale of love and romance but also his amazing in-depth knowledge of the history of Delhi. The intricate mixing of romance and history lends charm and verisimilitude, evoking the era of instability and chaos and confusion before the readers’ eyes. The reader is taken to the past and is made to feel the intense love affair between a sensitive poet and a voluptuous woman and the intrigues indulged in by power-hungry rulers.

Very appropriately the poet-narrator sums up his life of all consuming passion in the following words: “An affair of the heart brought me into disrepute: my poetry
earned me a name which resounded all over Hindustan. Love brought me anguish: poetry a feeling of ecstasy. What neither love nor poetry brought me was money” (195). His meeting with Begum Sahiba, a scheming and lusty woman, proves to be a turning point in his life. He is made to tell the readers how his equally unrelenting lustful life brought him untold miseries and drove him almost to the point of madness.

At the outset of his narration, Meer says when he was nine years old, his father a poet of erudition and wisdom, told him, “A fire has been lit in your heart. I fear what it will do to you.” (195) At that time, Meer laughed at his father for the statement, without realizing its import. But later in life, he understood the truth behind his father’s words of wisdom when he suffered agony and poverty owing to the indifference shown by his wealthy paramour who had sworn earlier that God had created her for him.

While recalling his earlier life in a hermitage on the outskirts of Akbarabad (Agra), he remembers his father, a bard, spending most of his waking hours in prayer and meditation. He would say if one loved God, he loved everything created by God; and he believed that it was love that maintained the Universe. He said, “All that you see in the world is a different manifestation of love. Fire is the heat of love, earth its foundation, air its restlessness, night its dream state, day its wakefulness.” (196) Meer says that he didn’t understand his father’s philosophical statements and their significance in his boyhood. But when he attained youthhood, love became the guiding star of his life and he found that “when abiding passion envelops a man he loses his head and heart to one woman.” (196) This was the truth he learnt after his liaison with a woman of voluptuous and wily nature.

Meer, the narrator, asserts that the buds of love blossomed in him with his first utterance of a verse as a reaction against the provocation made by a songster, named
Masood, reigning supreme till the advent of Meer in Agra. Meer expelled Masood by giving a suitable reply to Masood’s worn-out verse with a piece of poetry highlighting a new perspective on an old theme. He also recited an exciting verse on love composed by him the previous night. Thus, by the applause received from the public, Meer replaced Masood and became the rising-star of Hindustan. He also learnt that Masood, a handsome roguish fellow, was a part-time lover of Begum Sahiba, wife of Agra’s richest Nawab Rais Mian. Begum Sahiba’s attention then turned to the handsome young Meer, after her first encounter during the Musharia.

On invitation from Begum Sahiba, Meer went to meet her in her haveli (Mansion). To quote his words: “She was a short, stocky woman about thirty years of age. She was fair, round-faced with raven-black hair long enough for her to sit on. The only other things I noticed about her were her taut bosom and big rounded buttocks which almost burst out of her tight fitting pyjamas. Her steady gaze unnerved me;” (201). She invited him to the Bismillah ceremony of her younger son and offered him the post of tutor to her sons. Her intention was clear. A master “puppeteer”, she could plan others’ lives as they suited her.

Begum found an unattractive wife for Meer so as to make him take the path of infidelity. His wife Saleema was as thin as a bamboo rod, with an ugly face. A sumptuous dowry was given by Begum to Saleema’s father. It was the custom in those days to pay dowry to the bride’s family.

Begum Sahiba was a designing, masterful woman who had her way in everything. In old Nawab Rais she had the husband she wanted; with the singing rhymester who passed for a poet, she had a part-time lover she wanted….Since Meer Taqi’s star was in the ascendance, she was
determined to be his patron and his mistress. She found Taqi a wife he could ignore. (202)

Their romance began in the absence of Nawab Rais Mian. The old Nawab was very distressed owing to the Persian invasion. Utilizing this, Begum Sahiba spun a web of intrigue and sent her husband to Delhi to protect the country, but her real intention was different. Meer says he became a complete victim to the snares of this sex-hungry woman. He spent many blissful days in the company of Begum. “It was in her tightly clad firm body that I learnt the true meaning of life.” (206) He felt “like a fly stuck in a pot of honey ….she knew how to seduce; having seduced, how to give the man of her choice the illusion that no one else in the world mattered to her…. (208) But at the same time he says: “My days of penury were over but my days of freedom seemed to be coming to an end.” (208)

After sometime when this promiscuous woman had found another philanderer – also a poet – her eyes fell on him. She cunningly sent Meer to Delhi saying that he had to gain recognition in the Mughal court. He reached Delhi during those disturbed times. Through Nawab Rais Mian, he met Nawab Samsamuddaulah in Delhi and earned his patronage. It gave him a little money and relieved him of his utter poverty to some extent. Yet, he led a life of misery in the ravaged city of Delhi. Meer’s mind was now smitten with the thoughts of his Qamar (Begum Sahiba) and the plight of his family in Agra, as Begum Sahiba had stopped her financial support to his family. Though Meer got some recognition as a great poet in Delhi, it did not bring him any money. He looked like a beggar in the shattered city of Delhi and people even mistook him for a man with slight mental aberration. He is even confined in a mental asylum for some time.
Meer could not overcome the obsessive thought of his Qamar. To quote his own words:

I could not get her out of my mind. I sought her everywhere among the ruins of Delhi. Like the cup of the narcissus I carried the begging bowl of my eyes asking for alms of her sight. At every dawning of the day like the morning breeze I went knocking at every door of every street. I became like the flame of a candle flickering in a gusty morning wind. I burnt inside, melted, diminished and came close to death. A strange madness came over me. (222)

Meer says that hunger and insecurity drove him to Lucknow from Delhi. He attended a Mehfil (a hall in a court meant for poetry reading) there and the poets, seeing his pathetic appearance in wornout dress, asked him where on earth he had come from. He replies in poetry:

There once was fair city,
Among cities of the world the first in fame;
It hath been ruined and laid desolate,
To that city I belong, Delhi is its name. (231)

The novelist while portraying the romance between Meer and Begum Sahiba gives equal importance to the historical happenings in and around Delhi, thereby justifying the aptness of the title of the novel. Meer’s description of the horrendous deeds of Nadir Shah and the resultant havoc caused by them recreates a true picture of the turbulent times. “The accursed Nadir Shah had left behind him in Delhi thousands of widows to beat their breasts over their dead husbands and forced thousands of
orphans to go begging in the streets.” (225) After king Mohammed Shah’s death, his son Ahmed Shah ascended the Mughal throne. Being a weakling, he “preferred the company of nubile damsels and his wine cup” and left the affairs of the state to his mother and her confidant Javed Khan. Ahmad Shah’s brief rule came to an end. The Marathas after plundering suburbs of Delhi installed the grandson of Aurangzeb as the new emperor in 1754. In 1758, Ahmad Shah Abdali staked his claim to the empire of the Mughals. The devastation caused to the city and the trauma inflicted upon the people by Afghan invaders present a heart-rending picture of the ruined city. Meer, the narrator mourns:

Fires were started in the city, houses were looted and burnt down. Afghan ruffians broke down doors, tied up those found inside, burnt them alive or cut off their heads. There was bloodshed and destruction everywhere. People were stripped of their clothes to wander naked in the streets. For many days no one had anything to eat. The cry of the oppressed rose to the heavens. Abdali who styled himself Dur-i-Dauraan (a Pearl among Pearls) and a pillar of the faith, was as rapacious as a hungry lion and remained unmoved by the plight of his fellow Muslims. People in their thousands fled from Delhi into the open country where many died of hunger or exposure to the elements. I, who was poor, became poorer. My house, which stood on the main road, was leveled to the ground. (227)

Referring to the bravery of Sikhs, Khushwant Singh mentions that a force of forty to fifty thousand Sikhs fought the retreating Afghans with a courage rarely seen on battlefields.
There are references to Marathas, Jats and Gujars, who too indulged in all kinds of anti-social activities. They robbed and killed any man during the skirmish and they did not hesitate to rape women who fell into their clutches. There was nothing left throughout the city of Delhi for anyone to plunder. Shah Alam II returned to Delhi, but after a few years, Ghulam Qadir deposed Shah Alam II and put out his eyes. Not a single day passed without someone murdering someone else. Ghulam Qadir who desecrated Delhi city was captured alive by the Marathas and was tortured and beheaded.

The narrator Meer concludes this account by saying that he had seen eighty-eight summers and winters on the wretched earth. He also says that in his liaison with Begum Sahiba he experienced things sweet and bitter, magnificent and mean, things terrible and beautiful. He is shown as a witness to all the painful events that occurred in a long span of more than eighty tumultuous years and this gives the novelist an opportunity to speak at length about all the political turmoils of the times. Meer says about his dimming eye-sight, the death of his wife, sons and daughter. “I have no fear of dying. I had two loves in my life Begum Qamarunnissa (a beautiful damsel with a round face like the full moon) and Delhi. One destroyed me and the other was destroyed for me.”(225)

There is the heart-rending portrayal of Delhi during the period of Mutiny or the War of Independence. It is a great historical event and that has drawn the special attention of the novelist and he has devoted 76 pages to describe the blind persecution and massacres of the citizens of Delhi. People of the eternal Capital Delhi suffered untold miseries owing to their patriotic feelings. Sketching some of the characters in the ensuing chapters the novelist attempts to help the reader in understanding the
social setup of the period dealt with and also brings out the ethical standards or otherwise of the people.

In a chapter titled “Alice Aldwell” the fictionist portrays the life of a new community called Anglo-Indians which emerged during the Colonial period in India. The poignant picturization of this woman’s life during the 1857 mutiny evokes our pity. Being brought – up in an environment in Calcutta full of Eurasians (hybrids of Europeans and Asians) Alice married Aldwell a pucca European. She wanted to maintain her status as a pure European by distancing herself from her half-caste-contemporaries. She avoided mingling with them. Her husband -- a retired postal and telegraph employee -- preferred to stay back in Calcutta, but Alice had other plans. She was the proud mother of three daughters, whom she wanted to bring-up in a sophisticated typical English way. Moreover, she thought that the paltry pension earned by her husband might not suffice to lead a post-retirement life. She wanted him to take-up another post-retirement assignment in a city like Delhi, which would supplement the meagre pension amount. She gathered courage to approach her husband’s boss Mr.Atkins, a middle aged bachelor, to get a job for him. The boss used this opportunity to flirt with Alice at will. Alice compelled Aldwell to move to Delhi and prevented him from moving with Eurasians in Calcutta. Having come to Delhi, Alice wasted no time to be in the company of European gentry at parties. Once, the queen of a Muslim King hosted a dinner to the Sahibs (English men) and their women-folk. She presented mementos to the assembled Europeans, who reciprocated with shawls and filligry works to the queen. Though males were denied entry, the queen’s only son, recently married, accompanied the queen. He stared at the white girls and even penned some filthy verses. His eyes fell on Alice and her daughters too.
Yet Alice managed to protect her daughters. Even the queen scented the beastly thought of her son and chided him.

Eunuchs were at service with the Begum. White Sahibs too wanted to have a survey of harems of royal personages. The slight difference was the gentle way of Europeans compared to the rustic ways of Indian hosts. One can understand the effective part played by sex in achieving individual benefits (as in the case of Alice). Sahibs were considered the common enemies of Indians especially of Muslim masses in general. Rumours were afloat about the proposed invasion of India by Persians. The Muslims welcomed it and fired at the European guards. There was unrest and anarchy. Dead bodies were strewn all over the roads. To escape the wrath of mutineering Muslims, despite the Ramdan month, and to safeguard her daughters, Alice approached some of her Muslim women friends for getting the help of the Muslim King and his consort Queen Zeenat Mahal. Mirza Abdullah, the prince, did not allow the appeal to reach the royal couple. Mirza Abdullah, a lecher, hatched a devious plan and made them escape in palanquins in the guise of Muslims under the care of a Maulvi. Adopting Muslim names, the mother and daughters moved to a haveli, which Alice learnt was a place used by Mirza Abdullah for fun and private games. Alice understood the evil design of Mirza Abdullah but could not do anything. The care-taker of the building, another sadist hijda, made Alice ready for the onslaught of the lecherous prince.

Alice was subjected to extreme sexual harassment by Mirza Abdullah and two of his cronies that night. All the three men and the care-taker transgender behaved like animals in their sexual encounter with Alice Aldwell. The description of the crude and violent behaviour of these lechers, though raw, will move a sensitive reader to tears. When Alice’s daughters found their bruised mother in the morning they were
shocked to the core. Finally the agonized mother and daughters were kept in a cramped dormitory along with other white-women. Muslims were after the blood of Firangis (the European Usurpers). The hapless woman, Alice had decided to escape to England with her daughters (with the pension of her husband to start a life of peace).

It is to be noted here that Alice Aldwell made all attempts to hide her Anglo-Indian identity. When she left Calcutta with her English husband Alex Aldwell, her only intention was to be with the original breed of English men and to reach England so as to destroy her Eurasian identity. As per her plan she could reach Delhi and live in the company of English people for a short period. But her plans were shattered during the early uprising of Muslims against the British rule. To save her children’s life from the mutineers she sought the help of Muslim Maulvi and she disclosed her real origin saying that her mother was a Kashmiri Mussalmani and she was given away in marriage to a sahib and states “I had remained a Muslim.” (254) It is an irony that Alice’s efforts to hide her real identity fails and she is forced to disclose her Indian identity.

The Maulvi made them repeat the words that there was one God and Mohammed was His messenger and gave them Muslim names. Thus Alice became Ayesha Begum. Her three daughters—Mary, Fiona and Georgina – became Maryam, Fatima and Jeharana respectively, “The Maulvi was very pleased at having made three converts.” (255) The novelist has portrayed a typical Anglo-Indain who becomes real representative of her community. They too suffered during the early uprising of Muslims against the Colonialists. This episode presents the predicament of the half-caste Anglo-Indians who were discriminated both by the Indians as well as the Britishers.
The plight of Anglo-Indians has been consistently pitiable. Despite the ignominy of their birth, they had so much of vanity as to equate themselves with the British conquerors, merely owing to the colour of their skin. Considering themselves superior to the natives and speaking English at home, they aspired to become British citizens, and a good number of them did succeed in settling in Great Britain. A good number of them, however, were derided by both the British and the natives. It took a long time for them to come to terms with the reality.

It was the impact created by the then prevailing condition of riots in Delhi in 1857. Queen Zeenat got-up a feast for ending the Ramdan month fast. There was joy and jubilation everywhere. The holy-Jihad of Muslims was not yet over. One place after another fell to the well-trained European brigade. The defeated Muslim Kings, chieftains and their descendents were made servile by being offered pension by the Firangis. Even Prince Mirza was no exception. Slowly but steadily the Firangis gained upper hand. The Muslims, praising their glittering Jewels like Shah Jahan, Akbar and Aurangazeb were hoping to reestablish Muslim dynasty but in vain.

Another interesting character Nihal Singh represents the Sikh community and affords an opportunity to the novelist to probe the Sikh psyche in an in-depth manner. Nihal Singh gives an account of his life in Delhi. As a child, he had learnt from his mother that Aurungazeb, the king of Delhi, beheaded their religious Guru. It is to be noted here that with this painful event, the deep seated hatred of the Sikhs for the Muslims began. This chapter hints at how this hatred is utilised by the British Colonialists to quell the Muslim uprising. They enlisted the brave Sikhs for this purpose and it helped them indirectly to strengthen their foothold in India. Nihal Singh’s ancestors were brave and looted Delhi and brought gold and silver. Bhaghel Singh built a big Gurudwara at the place of their Guru. The narrator says that he also
learnt that the Muslims rose against the Jan Company and installed the grandson of Aurungazeb on the throne as king. Propelled by the above information on Delhi, Nihal Singh says he was prompted to visit the great city. Friends Lehna and Natha accompanied him. They reached Ambala. A big Sahib (European) probed them. He had a hundred Sikhs given by Raja of Jind with him. He took Nihal Singh and his friends along with him. He was confident of throwing Muslims out with the help of chivalrous Sikhs. This English man was Hodson. He appointed Nihal Singh as his orderly. All the Sikhs were given uniforms and guns. On the onward journey Gora Brigade too joined. They passed through Gharaunda, Samalka and Race. They had some rest and had a glimpse of the Sutlej River, which was gliding like a sophisticated princess. Pigeons were flying to be the ambassadors of peace; no drums of war were heard. The bugle roused the warriors from slumber. The soldiers occupied a mansion of a Maratha named Hindu Rao. Muslims were ready to fight rebels, be they Hindus, or others. Others like Gorkhas were faithful followers of Sahibs (Europeans) ready to plunge into action. Next day morning an enemy cavalry was racing towards them. Many on Sahib’s side were shot and killed. The enemies offered better monetary proposals to win the faithful non-Firangis to their side.

The Sikhs turned butchers in beheading the Muslim Mutineers. Pestilence pervaded making camp hospitals full of soldiers affected by dreadful contagions like cholera, dysentery and fever. Muslims were busy to enroll non-Firangis in their Jihad. They sent Qurans and Ganges water through their emissaries. They promised more pay and incentives for the head of a gora. The Sahibs employed spies to find out the infidels. Pathans, Sikhs, Biloches embraced the Milacha Sahibs. The slippery slush made it a hell for the march of majestic elephants. Rain stopped the march on either side of Kashmiri Gate, the enemies’ gun-shots were repelled. Sahib’s army was on
rampage killing many people on the way. A lone female fighter with a Talwar in hand was sighted and arrested. She belonged to a regiment led of Bakht Khan, a Muslim general. An order was issued to finish her life. The captive was ill-treated by Nihal Singh and his people. Braving the situation, she knelt and prayed for not only Muslims, but also for their enemies. This moved Nihal Singh, who let her escape in the darkness. A woman’s valour showed the resolve of Muslims to fight for a cause – Jihad. There was no peace. War of hatred continued on both sides.

The novelist seems to say that it is understandable to know ardour of Indian people to remove an alien oppressive rule. What is not understandable is the in-fight among the people of India divided by caste, creed and religion. The division among the Indians was a great advantage to the alien rulers. The Britishers were able to capture the country by their divide and rule policy. This haunts even now disrupting amity and peace between people professing different faiths. The “legacy” left by the British continues till date in India and the politicians of all hues and colours use this “create animosity and rule” policy to advance their self interest. The Indian Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus had a legitimate sense of possession of their mother land, yet they were dispossessed of this feeling owing to Colonial regime’s machinations. In spite of all differences they were showing their dissent together at regular intervals against the Whites.

The chapter titled “The Builders” talks very alluringly about the construction of Delhi by the British administration. The interesting aspect of this part of the novel lies in its autobiographical overtones. The narrator of this section is the son of a renowned builder of modern Delhi. In reality it is a veiled reference to Khushwant Singh’s father Sobha Singh, who amassed enormous wealth working as a civil engineering contractor. His deep perception of men and matters come to the fore
revealing his understanding of the behaviour and character of English men who had served the colonial rulers in India. This chapter appears to be a special inclusion by the novelist to present his own views on the evolution of modern Delhi as a formidable capital of a vast nation and the unremitting sincere plans and projects of the Colonial British regime to construct it on a sound footing. The alien rulers’ contribution to the modernisation of the country is detailed in this section which shows their sincerity and commitment to the cause.

The narrator tells the reader that he is a descendant of one of the famous builders of modern Delhi during the early 20th century. Khushwant Singh’s father Sobha Singh becomes fictional Sujan Singh. All that the narrator relates is nothing but historical facts told in an artistic way. He recalls the events and incidents that happened after the decision of the Viceroy to shift the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi. He describes the serious conflict that led to the clash between two British architects namely Edwin Lutyen and Baker. But both were earnest in their work. At the same time the novelist mentions the great historical fact of momentum gathered by the nationalist movement for a free India.

The builder is shown as a real business man—intelligent, enterprising and pragmatic. He knew the psychology of satisfying the “needs” of the people who mattered for smooth transaction of doing his business. He told his son that the English officers were upright and loyal to their government and will accept only fruits as gifts whereas the Anglo-Indian and Indian subordinates expected besides presents money too. “Most Anglo-Indian officials also expected money or whisky. English officials who knew what was going on never accepted anything beyond baskets of fruit with a bottle or two of whisky thrown in on bara din.” (324) The British contribution to the building of this modern city as well as the Indian builders’ contribution to its growth
are brought out realistically with anecdotes involving the narrator’s father. It is an irony that Indians working under the alien rulers took to corrupt practices easily all the while admiring the incorruptible nature of their British bosses. In the case of Indians everything stopped with admiration yielding no place for emulation.

Delhi had been the capital of Hindustan under different dynasties -- Mughal, Hindu, Sikh and Rajputs. The East India Company from England anchored in Calcutta to do commercial activities, nurturing an ambition to establish Colonial rule in India slowly but surely. Calcutta became a place of hybrid cultures of the English and Indians. Many sophisticated families were proud of Calcutta and its posh culture and never wanted to be away from the city. Considering the congested atmosphere and paucity of spaces to have Government buildings, the Governors and Viceroyys, over the years, considered it better to move to Delhi, which had remained the pride of India for thousands of years. They wanted to have the offices in the sprawling citadel near the fortresses built by Muslim rulers and pink–coloured monuments erected by the Rajputs. At the same time they knew that it was not an easy task to shift the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Moreover they knew that the division of Bengal by Lord Curzon had created an impression that the importance of Bengalis would wane paving the way for the rise of Muslims as a force to reckon with. India already under turmoil by religious rifts was full of opportunistic elements to promote their self-interests and fortunes by their adulation of fair-skinned Britishers, whose administrative acumen they admired and preferred them rather than a government by Indians. In these circumstances the British regime was firm in shifting the capital and decided to entrust the work to Indian contractors.

A contractor by name Sujan Singh, who was a Punjabi and known for his parsimony, thought it prudent to make hay amassing wealth be-friending many British
Officials and Chaprasis by bribing them to get contracts to build Viceroy-residences and Secretariat Buildings in Delhi to be made the new capital. He was enjoying the patronage of some British officials like Viceroy Hardinge and architects Haily and Baker, who were in-charge of construction affairs. The contractor had many lands acquired over the years. Hence it was easy for him to get contract works without any tender called for. He had his son also groomed after him. Education of the son was stopped, as the father thought that education was only a tool to earn.

Viceroy Lord Hardinge and his wife Vicereine decided to take up residence in Delhi. Elaborate arrangements were made to receive them at Delhi railway station and the Red Fort. It was planned to take them in procession on elephantback through the municipal gardens and Chandini Chowk to the Red Fort. Gala preparations to welcome the Viceroy and his wife were on. People were thronging to have a glimpse of their care-takers. As planned, the Hardinges were received by some maharajas at the station and the procession started from Delhi station. British officials on horse backs, the Hardinges on caparisoned elephants and entourage on camels and son of the contractor on a newly bought Raleigh cycle, wound their way to the huge ground – “King’s Way Camp”. The British Officers had provided chairs and galleries for people of different rankings in the society. But the procession came to a halt owing to some unfortunate event.

The narrator (The contractor’s son) learnt that a bomb had been hurled from the roof of a bank building and it had killed the Viceroy’s umbrella-bearer; and Viceroy Lord Hardinge was also wounded and he was taken to a hospital. As a result he lost the earlier enthusiasm in the new city project. He wanted to leave India but was persuaded to stay for another six months. After Hardinge’s tenure was over, Lord Chelmsford succeeded him as Viceroy. He was old and weak. He understood the
feelings of Indians fighting for India’s freedom. Lord Reading became the next Viceroy. Then came Lord Irwin. He was a middle aged man and was friendly with the nationalist leaders of India. He was earnest in involving Indians in administering the country.

Amidst all these, the contractor was busy in getting his inflated bills passed. He was also getting contracts to build quarters for Government Officers. His son dreamt of driving his own car to Qutub Minar, his long cherished ambition. His father was elated at the “high ideals” of his son. As time went on, the aged man retired to his native village in Punjab to look after the properties along with two of his sons.

Khushwant Singh makes use of this opportunity for bringing out the attitude of people in British India. Everybody was interested in taking care of their self interest, by showing their loyalty and friendship to the regime and taking advantage of it for furthering his own interest while contractors and others wanted to make money in abundance through their work, the Indian Officers indulged in corruption, unmindful of the undesirable impression they created on the rulers. When the Viceroy came to Delhi, the natives vied with each other in showing their admiration. At the same time the bomb-throwing incident indicate that there were some people in India who were out to sabotage the regime. This streak was to continue and end up in creating a good number of rebels who believed in violence.

The contractor-son became a man with monopoly to run the business. He purchased a car and took his family and friends to Qutub Minar--a mission for him. In between, the news of the failing health of his father made him rush to his native place. The father was probably holding on to his life to see his prosperous son. It may be noted that there is a belief among the Indians that old people before breathing their last would wait to see their beloved children. It is mentioned in this episode. Entirely
satisfied with him, the old man got a promise from his son to pay back certain amount to his debtors after his death. He also got an assurance from him that the properties should be shared among the brothers without the intervention of a third party or court, as it would defame the family name. Finally he breathed his last. The funeral was attended by all the villagers irrespective of religion, caste and creed. After 10 days’ stay, the contractor’s son returned to Delhi to look after the assigned works of construction. Construction work was moving at a snail’s pace owing to the war England was engaged in. The presentation of the family history of the builder portrays the successful joint family system which was in vogue in the country side.

Delhi remained a multicultural city with relics of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism in the form of dilapidated citadels, delightful Mughal gardens, plundered temples, marble-covered mosques, Sikh shrines with the Holy *Granth Sahib* and the flowing Yamna. People of all religions following their respective religious doctrines seemed to live in harmony under the Colonial Rule, yet boiling to remove an alien rule. At the same time they were aware of the mighty strength of the British Army. They gave vent to their ire at all possible opportunities. The people of India always remembered the fact that the East India Company came to India only for trading purposes but the Britishers established the Colonial Rule amidst resentment of Indian population consisting of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. But the people of India were united in banishing the alien European rule but divided in their selfish interests. The World War started and the British Government was forced to pay greater attention to this the Indian leaders fighting for the nation’s freedom understood the difficult situation of the Colonial rulers.

The duty of recruiting young Indians to ward off the enemy fell on the contractor’s son. Many Muslims, Hindus, Rajputs, Punjabis considered it their sacred
duty to help their rulers. This was mainly because of the acute unemployment problem prevalent at that time. Even the freedom fighters like Gandhiji kept in abeyance their freedom struggle for some time. War came to a halt. The British officials came to India and had a conference with Gandhiji. Vallabhai Patel, Rajaji and Pandit Nehru were making strides in the formation of a National Government for India. Unable to contain the patriotic fire and fervour in Indians, the British government sent Lord Mountbatten to India to draft a smooth change-over of governance. It was still a debate whether the Indians with their different ideologies and immature experience would be able to govern. (It may be noted here that even some old people in free India, prefer the British rule to an Indian Government).

This chapter of the novel refers to the methodical efficiency and ruthless discipline of the works of Colonial regime in building a modern capital, (New Delhi), building dams and fillip given to agricultural operations. Whereas, “unity in diversity” oft quoted by Indian national leaders, is yet to be realised. Post freedom Governments found it extremely difficult to forge a sense of complete unity among people, especially among people professing different faiths. The United India seems to be a mirage, with Pakistan and India standing divided on Kashmir issue which makes intruders of peace enjoy liberties. So forging of bonds took a long long time, even after Independence. If there is unity among many races in India it is owing to the pragmatism of rulers who took over. The modern city was built with the meticulous planning of the British and sweat of the sons of the soil. The Britishers did not do much harm to the monuments that existed for ages proclaiming the great tradition and culture of India. The narration points to these facts spontaneously and unobtrusively.

Through fictional episodes this chapter titled “The Dispossed” presents an astoundingly realistic picture of the happenings that immediately followed the
partition up to the assassination of Mahathma Gandhi. Partition caused a lot of painful paradoxes, one of which is seen in Hadali, a village on the banks of Jhelum. The Hindus and Sikhs of the village were tradesmen and money-lenders whereas the Muslims worked for them. But since the place went to Pakistan, overnight the Muslims became powerful and menacing with their muscle power. With all their property which is not much except brick built houses and buffaloes, the minority Hindus and Sikhs had to flee the place. The ones who stayed, like the parents of the narrator Ram Rakha suffered much. Young Ram Rakha could not understand the sudden appearance of hostility in the Muslims who had behaved like brethren till the other day.

Through Ram Rakha’s family story, Khushwant Singh makes the reader understand the social reality of the times. Growing patriotism and brewing animosity marked the era. The divide and rule policy of the Britishers paved the way for wedging rift between India and Pakistan. Gandhiji and Jinnah became the icons of their countries. Exodus of citizens continued unabated across the borders. The religious fanatics on both sides indulged in atrocities of all kinds. As a result, mutilated bodies lay strewn all over the frontier areas to the waiting vultures.

Ram Rakha’s family lived in Hadali, which went to Pakistan after partition. The village was inhabited by majority Muslims. Yet the minority Hindus and Sikhs were moderately rich and powerful tradesmen lending money to the Muslims. The majority Muslim population was a contrast to the minority Hindus. After partition Muslims became menacingly powerful and began to harass Hindus and Sikhs. Hindus began to migrate to the refugee-camps. Still Ram Rakha’s family stayed back to collect their dues and to sell their thatched huts. In between, the marriage of Lachmi, sister of Ram Rakha was fixed. Some days prior to the marriage, Lachmi was
abducted by some Muslim youngsters and converted to Islam. This incident affected the parents of Lachmi beyond one’s comprehension. To quote Ram Rakha, the narrator: “My father was like one possessed of the Devil. He screamed and tore his hair…. He ran thirteen miles over the sand dunes to a police station and lodged a report. He gave wads of rupee notes to the Inspector” (351). Efforts to retrieve her failed as the police connived with the miscreants and the case was quashed in the court on the ground that Lachmi willingly went with the Muslim boy. But the reality was different. Ram Rakha presents the truth behind this pathetic happening. To quote his words:

The Inspector and the police were Mussalmans. The accused and their lawyer were Mussalmans. Our lawyer was a Musselman. (All Hindu lawyers had fled to India). The magistrate was also a Musselman. He dismissed my father’s complaint and ordered the accused to be released forthwith. They went out of the courtroom jumping for joy. We begged for protection. The magistrate sent for the Mussalmans and said, ‘You’ve got what you wanted. Leave the miserable kafirs alone’. The Inspector took more money from us to escort us back to Hadali. Constables were posted outside our homes for our safety. They also took money from us.(351)

The corruption prevalent in the police force and judiciary and the communal favouritism of the times are brought out beyond doubt and it has become almost a continuing evil till today.

The family of Ram Rakha was left with no other option except to trek back to concentration camps empty handed. Ram Rakha, the narrator, then talks about their
family’s arduous journey to Lahore, Kurukshetra and finally to Delhi and describes what he saw on his way to Delhi.

We saw many Sikhs lying dead on the road with their long hair scattered about and their bearded faces covered with flies. We crossed the Indo-Pakistan border. There were many more corpses along the road. From the shape of their penises I could tell they were Mussalmans. There were lots of women and children among the dead. (352)

Ram Rakha’s father managed to meet his boyhood friend in Delhi, who was now well off. The friend was kind enough to accommodate the family in a small garage used for dumping materials. Ram Rakha’s father was given a job of night watchman patrolling with a lantern throughout the nights. Ram Rakha was chided by him as a useless son. Mother was the only source of consolation and comfort to him. But his sad mother was obsessed with the thought of her abducted daughter Lachmi. She used to weep and wail over the fate of her daughter almost every day. One evening “She slapped her forehead with both her hands and began to cry: ‘Hai Lachmi! Haibeti!’ where are you! May the accursed Mussalmans who took you go to hell.’ The dog came to her, sniffed in her ears and began to whine.” (360). Even the stray dog which got a little food every day from her could understand her pathetic plight. This drives home the helplessness experienced by the victims of partition and the impact of communal frenzy of the times.

On his outing to seek some job, one day Ram Rakha tumbled on a group of people, who took him to a house, full of saffron clad people. He came under the care of the organisation known as Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. Bent upon freeing the people from the Muslim-pampering leaders like Gandhiji, Nehru and Kripalani, the
organisation arranged for daily prayers to Bharatmata and physical exercises to make
steely and patriotic people to fight the Muslim onslaught. Ram Rakha came to be
known by a number given to him like others. A date and venue were fixed to enable
the outfit to loot and kill a Muslim shop owner. Ram Rakhawas ordered to execute the
plan. Propelled by patriotic fervour and promised duty, Ram Rakha carried out the
plan meticulously and returned to his headquarters with looted articles. But, earlier he
had to face hurdles for finding out the Muslims, who were sheltering themselves with
the shaven-face, and pyjama, kurta and Gandhi caps to conceal their identities.

Ram Rakha returned to his house with a bangle for his mother and a torch to
replace the lantern in his father’s hands during his security duties. The parents were
obviously happy about their earning son. Ram Rakha was given an assignment to spy
and report about the people thronging the Birla House, where Gandhiji used to meet
dignitaries and conduct usual prayers. Eminent citizens like Dr.Susila Nayar, Nehru
and Patel, frequented the place. Gandhiji used to scribble on papers and read out the
contents. He was adored as God-incarnation. Being a moderate, he had consented to
make the Indian Government give a mercenary compensation to Pakistan. Despite all
this, the fanatic Muslims hated Hindus and did irreparable damage to the properties
and their lives.

The equally fanatic Hindu group RSS was sad about it. Gandhiji went on
indefinite fast to stop the ongoing struggle between Hindus and Muslims. There was
no reciprocation of good will response from the Muslims. Gandhiji was asserting that
his fast was owing to an inner call and it would continue till the mad fiat was over. It
was in the year 1948 January 30, during the course of his walk to the prayer podium
supported by Ben sisters, under the pretext of an on-looker, a person shot him from
point blank range. The frail frame of Gandhiji slumped with the chanting of word
“Ram”. Ram Rakha was obviously near the assailant. Police took everyone including him for interrogation. Later he was let free. The inevitable happened. People ran helter and shelter. They despised the assailant. Nehru and others in the Government were terribly shocked yet there were some people who preferred an authoritarian Government, even an alien one like the British Government once again to take charge and to bring in a modicum of discipline in the land of tradition and culture.

The episodes reveal how innocent, pious and mild tempered Ram Rakha is made to commit heinous crimes according to the instructions of the bigots. Even after going to Delhi Ram Rakha was not hardened enough to wound Muslims at sight; it happened only after he was subjected to indoctrination by RSS bigots. It was they who fueled hatred in him. When he first listened to Gandhiji’s hymns, they sounded soul-fulfilling to him, until someone made a mockery of that.

Khushwant Singh is able to get under the skin of the bigots and dissect the working of their minds. They were a well-organised and disciplined lot. After knowing the painful past of Ram Rakha, they decided to use him for wreaking vengeance on Muslims. They assigned to him the duty of being with Gandhi at Birla Mandhir and asked him to pass on the news of his movements. After having undergone indoctrination, everything Gandhi did looked ludicrous to him. At the same time he was amazed at the working of Gandhi magic. Through his words, the novelist gives us an idea of the love and respect people had for Gandhi and the utmost length to which they were willing to go just to please him.

The murder of Gandhi is presented in a few deft strokes and that shows the craftsmanship of Khushwant Singh. To quote Ram Rakha:
And then everything happens so quickly that I have to go over it again and again to make sure I really saw it happen. A stout, young fellow muscles his way through the crowd, pushes aside a girl who tries to stop him, bends down as if to touch Gandhi’s feet, draws a revolver from the fold of his dhoti and before anyone can guess what he is up to pumps three bullets into the Old Man, thah, thah, thah. Gandhi’s hands remain joined as if he is bidding namaskar to the world. He says, Ram, Ram. Then he crumples down in a pool of his own blood. (374)

What comes after is significant. The murder of Mahatma Gandhi shook Ram Rakha’s very being who was forced into extremism by circumstances. Basically good and soft hearted Ram Rakha felt as if he had killed Gandhi and started crying inconsolably. The guilty feeling made him very sad. An evidence of how humanism does not get totally extinguished even after the mind having been filled with hatred.

In the final chapter of the novel, the novelist presents a gruesome picture of what happened after Indira’s murder. It gives a graphic description through episodes the incidents that led to the military operation against Bhindranwale. That led to Indira’s murder which is mentioned just as a passing reference. But the carnage in which Sikhs were killed for no fault of theirs is graphically and poignantly described in detail. It tells how easy it is to create hatred and what it can do to human mind and society when it is created. The last scene in which the so called mad Budh Singh is killed by a maddened mob, who have lost all their sensitivity is a poignant reminder to society to free itself from fanaticism.

It will be of interest to know the circumstances that led to the murder of Indira Gandhi. Years 1970 to 1985 saw the emergence of a group of separatists in Punjab.
These fanatic Sikhs pressed for separate Khalistan State and the Government of India was finding it extremely difficult to quell them. Under their new-found self-styled leader Bhindranwale, the militant Sikhs were creating trouble. From the precincts of the Golden Temple, Bhindranwale expressed hateful words against Hindus instigating the Sikhs to wage a war for a separate state. This irked the entire nation and the sensible people who believed in the unity of the country. The Government headed by Indira Gandhi sent the army to the holy shrine to threaten Bhindranwale and make him surrender. It did not happen. With no possible peaceful solution at sight, the then Iron Lady Indira Gandhi took a bold but misguided decision of flushing out the hiding Bhindranwale and company from the precincts of Golden Temple through a military action named “Operation Blue Star.” On 5th June, 1984 the army entered the temple and blasted Bhindranwale’s stronghold and with it blasted the seat of Sikh spiritual and temporal authority.

Fires were exchanged from within and outside the Temple. Bullets of the Army silenced the militants at the same time hurting the religious sentiments of the Sikhs as their holy book *Granth Sahib* and Temple at Amritsar were pierced. Indira Gandhi “let the army slay a thousand innocent pilgrims: grey beards, black beards, no beards, women and babies in-arms.”(386) Indira Gandhi justified the military action for protecting the nation’s unity from various disruptive forces that clandestinely wanted to make a single nation into many nations. But the “wounded” Sikh community did not accept it. Sikhs were waiting to take revenge against Indira and Hindus. October 31, 1984 saw the biggest catastrophe in the political firmament, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated by one of her trusted Sikh guards, while she was walking on the lawns. Cries “Long live Bhindranwale, long live and Awadhi Indiraji”
rent the air. Sikhs and Hindus were at loggerheads throwing missiles and abuses at each other.

Violence erupted on 1\textsuperscript{st} November and continued for a few days killing innocent Sikh men, women and children. The Sikhs travelling in buses and trains were lynched and burnt. The trans Yamna area of Delhi was the most affected one. Ruffians belonging to the Congress(I) and anti-social elements ransacked the houses of the Sikhs and looted their shops. A mob consisting of nearly fifty young men armed with rods, knives and clubs entered a Gurudwara and dragged out the Bhai and beat him up with rods and brought the copies of holy \textit{Granth Sahib} and carpets and heaped them and sprinkled petrol on it. “One puts a match to it and the heap burst into flame…. He (the Bhai) shrinks and crumples into a flaming corpse.”(388)

The Sikh narrator describes the most tragic scene of the lynching of Budh Singh in the Gurudwara courtyard. Peeping through the hedge he could see the disturbed and agitated Budh Singh standing by the side of smouldering ashes of the \textit{Granth} and the Bhai. Yelling abuses at the gang of young men he whirled the kirpan like a dancing dervish. The evil young men played a cat and mouse game with Budh Singh. They prodded Budh Singh in the back with their rods. The old, tired, mentally deranged and grief-stricken Budh Singh could not withstand the onslaught of this furious mob; and his kirpan falls out of his hand.

One fellow picks it up and pokes it in his bottom. Two lads pounce on him and pin his arms behind his back. One takes out a pair of scissors and begins to clip off Budh Singh’s beard. Budh Singh spits in his face. The fellow slaps him on the face, catches him by his long hair and cuts off a bunk. They’ve had their fun. They get down to serious business. A boy gets a car tyre, fills its inside rim with petrol and lights
it. It is a fiery garland. Two boys hold it over Budh Singh and slowly bring it down over his head to his shoulders. Budh Singh screams in agony as he crumples down to the ground. (391)

Life without humour is a boat without rudder. Khushwant Singh arrests the attention of readers not only with historicity of Delhi under various Muslim Dynastic rulers but also with the easy going society indulging in sexual extravaganza with the whores and *hijdas*. The Sikh narrator’s own flirtation with them makes the movement of the story an engaging one. Khushwant Singh enlivens his narrative account of Delhi with a lot of historical descriptions of mosques, forts, gardens, fields and monuments in a praiseworthy manner. In order to relieve the reader of the boredom of such details, he indulges in a lighter vein describing the life of the working class and the diplomats, who find outlet in sex to their tension-packed life style. They find happiness in the temporary company of professional whores, mainly *hijdas*. *Hijdas* are transgenders not knowing whether they are masculine or feminine or both. One such *hijda* was Bhagmati. When she was born her parents were not able to confirm the sex of the child. Doctors too were not sure. Finally a change crept-in, owing to gruff voice and body language, Bhagmati was comfortable in female attire. The professional *hijdas*, who used to dance and clap their hands to collect money from shops and houses, were frequently making enquiries about the child. Finally to avoid disrespect from the society, she was sold to them. She joined their clan. She was married to a man, who had already two *hijdas* as his wives. He was taking care of all of them and was particular about the money, they were bringing to him. Bhagmati was no exception.

Khushwant Singh, through all these, gives an elaborate account of the transgenders in India, who form part of the culture, despite being miniscule minority.
Without exception they are abandoned by their parents and are brought up by other transgenders. Their life is pathetic indeed and their plight seldom caught the attention of the ruling class.

Bhagmati’s intimate relationship with the Sikh narrator is a special feature of the novel. From the significance given to their relationship by the novelist, the reader could construe they were more like man and wife. The first meeting between Bhagmati and the Sikh narrator took place in odd circumstances. It happened in this way. The Sikh narrator helping the foreign diplomats in escorting them to places of historical importance, once was travelling in his car. He chanced to see a lady lying on the road foaming at mouth due to epileptic attack. Two passers-by, after offering some help, left the place. The humane in the Sikh narrator made him take the lady to his apartment. The watch-man Budh Singh was accustomed to allow him at odd hours into the colony despite this man coming with different ladies. But when he came with a transgender, he protested loudly. This was how a transgender was looked upon in those days. But the narrator was sympathetic towards the hijda. She was given food and his T-shirt. Later they met frequently. She enticed and aroused the beast in him with her professional acumen. Thus blossomed a sexual relationship between the two. Frequency of her visit to his room went unabated. He began to take her around Delhi.

Time passed. The waning lust for Bhagmati prompted the Sikh narrator to look for new “horizons”. He got a phone call from one Kamala, enquiring about his giving an interview. She was all praise for the articles of his. Readily he accepted to meet her in the Central Library. The day came. Kamala, a Tamil by birth, introduced herself as the wife of an army man, away on duty, and mother of three children. Her wiry frame belied her age. She was living in Military Canteen Quarters. She reluctantly agreed to take him to her quarters for a coffee with the fond hope of
becoming a scribe in partnership. She was afraid of the gossip of the wives of army men. Yet her ambition to become a journalist overpowered her. They created avenues to meet and go places like Cannaught Place, Qutub Minar, Chandini Chowk, The Taj, Red Fort, etc. Kamala had different ideas about Aurangzeb for his cruelty in destroying Hindu temples and citadels, but the Sikh narrator had high praise for the Muslim ruler. It was a surprise to see a suppressed Sikh member singing in praise of an oppressor. Result, the lonely wife of the army man walked into the snares spread by the sexy Sikh. Then he went abroad; and when he returned to India he learnt of fanatic Sikhs seeking for a separate state. And that made him really unhappy.

It was a long time since the Sikh narrator met Bhagmati. Owing to internal religious turmoil, between Sikhs and others, Delhi witnessed commotion. Indira Gandhi’s assassination led to unprecedented violence. Nobody was prepared to leave the house. The narrator despite his desire to stir out, confined himself to his house. That day to his surprise, Bhagmati entered his apartment to warn him from loitering outside. Though she was hijda whore, her attachment to one of her old clients proclaimed her concern for her well-wisher. But for Bhagmati, the life of the Sikh narrator would have been in danger. Bhagmati’s life has been one of neglect by the society, a life of struggle yearning to get an identity, a life of disgrace of a hijda whore and finally a life of sacrifice to save her client from the jaws of death.

The Sikh narrator felt that India had once again become a tattered land because of civil commotions born out of hatred among religious out-fits. Much battered Delhi, surrounded by grand Gurudwaras, tall Temples and majestic Mosques and flowing rivers has been reduced to relics of such monuments. People too, instead of being chastised by their religious scriptures to follow the path of tranquility and
comradeship, were enticed by pithy and narrow differences of opinions on people of other religions. After all, all the religions teach love as the cardinal principle.

The Sikh narrator, now a fairly aged and mellowed person, viewed the happenings from the point of view of a patriotic Indian citizen and felt dejected. At the behest of Bhagmati, he could have sacrificed his beard and turban and kirpan to save his life. Yet, he wanted to be a true but peace loving Indian Sikh. He saw his own friend, a slightly lunatic Sikh fanatic Budh Singh pinned and burnt to death by a group of militant Hindus. Police too could only be passive observers. This left a lasting impression on his mind. Very often he remembered the cruel killing that made him think of man’s inhumanity to man.

Like in the earlier two novels, the gripping narrative is the principal characteristic feature of this novel. The skilful handling of the narrative stance could be discerned from an analysis of the point-of-view adopted by the novelist to tell the story. He has avoided the usual third person omniscient point-of-view and has adopted a first person mode of narration to authenticate his material. He has made Aurangzeb Alamgir, Nadir Shah, Meer Taqi Meer speak to the readers directly. The Builders and the Dispossessed are also made to speak in the first person. “Even within the first person stance, he uses the channels of both the author’s and the character’s words, thoughts and perceptions to convey the story to the reader.” (140, Surabhi Banerjee, A Man Called Khushwant Singh).

No event nor any incident is presented in a dull and uninteresting manner in this work. The facile and spontaneous narration engages the attention of the reader from the start to the finish. The serious historical subject is interlaced with the episodes involving the Sikh narrator and his paramour, the transgender Bhagmati. Their romance and sexual encounters highlighted in the highly hilarious comic mode
prove Khushwant Singh’s predilection for the bawdy and the porno. The all-pervasive comic spirit in these episodes speaks well of the forte Khushwant Singh is capable of. Many a critic has laid stress on this aspect of the novel.

The Sikh narrator while talking about his sexual orgies with hermaphrodite Bhagmati compares the lustful act to a mystic’s approach to his merger with the Divine Lover. The *Scala Mentiis* the term used for the union. The three parts of sexual union are compared to a mystic’s endeavour. “The first rung in the ladder was the purgatory, the second the seeking; the third the final act of destruction of the individual self (fana) and the merging of two lights into one” (Lalit Kumar 45). The three stages are like masturbation, sexual intercourse and the resultant response of the body. This kind of comparison provokes laughter in the reader. This may also be a sarcastic dig on Indian Yogis who sacrifice bodily pleasures for the sake of attaining Divine Union.

The powerful use of symbols and metaphors provides added strength to the narrative charm of this novel too. The creation of Bhagmati as a eunuch serves the novelist to portray symbolically the exploitation and invasions of Delhi city at the hands of various rulers. Bhagmati , the whore, is exploited by many and suffers humiliations. The sad plight of Bhagmati is comparable to the predicament of Delhi, a city much ravaged over centuries as it has remained a power centre for thousands of years. Bhagmati acts as a link between the past and the present day Delhi.

Two characters—Mir Nihal and Asghar—help the novelist to present symbolically the sharp contrast between tradition and modernity. The former stands for values of the old order and the latter represents the new order of life. Mir Nihal suffers defeat at the hands of Asghar. Mir Nihal symbolises rigidity which brings about his unhappy end and it symbolises the destruction of old order. Asghar
representing the new generation wants change and accepts it according to the exigencies of the times and feels triumphant.

The use of irony is a powerful device used by Khushwant Singh. It is highly sad and ironical that Alice Aldwell who uses sex for achieving her goal of getting a job for her husband in Delhi but later it is in Delhi she is forced to face horrible sexual violence from the two beastly men and one sadist transgender to save her daughters. Her pitiable plight points to the fact that no one was safe in Delhi including Eurasians and the English people during the struggle for power. A most noteworthy feature of Khushwant Singh’s style is his neutral analysis of Western and Indian lifestyles. An unsentimental observer of Indian life, he could perceive it without any passionate leanings; and the result is unscrupulous objectivity in the portrayal of life with all its shortcomings and merits.