Khushwant Singh's *A History of the Sikhs* is the first attempt, on a comprehensive scale, “to tell the story of the Sikhs from their inception to the present day”; judicious use is made of extensive researches in this area, including study of original, unpublished documents and historical records. It not merely carries forward the exhilarating history of the Sikhs from Captain Joseph Cunningham’s well known work *A History of the Sikhs*, which has been considered a standard work in this area; it also postulates a central concept underlying the origin and growth of Sikh religion in India and the vicissitudes of fortune of the Sikh power in the Punjab.

The viewpoint that gives centrality and unity to Khushwant Singh's *A History of the Sikhs*, in spite of its apparent diffusion of narration, is that of the moral, cultural, religious, and national expression. The story of the Sikhs in India, writes Khushwant Singh, "is the story of the rise, fulfilment and collapse of Punjabi nationalism." *A History of the Sikhs* is thus a testament of national self--expression. Race, language, culture, religion, and the growth of social and moral ethos of the Sikhs contribute to the making of their history, which becomes the powerful expression of their cultural consciousness and collective achievement.

*A History of the Sikhs*, in two volumes, is so detailed and comprehensive an account of the Sikhs' religion, of their rise to power, and of their fall, that it is difficult to be summarized. What needs to be done is to point out some of the salient features of Khushwant Singh's historical presentation of the social, political, and religious aspects of Sikh history, to distil from that presentation his basic historical approach and, finally, to evaluate the quality and validity of his fundamental attitudes and basic historical beliefs in the light of an objective assessment of the achievement, past and present, of the Sikhs.

Khushwant Singh commences the story of the Sikhs by outlining the geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious, and political background of their
homeland, the Punjab. At the time of the Aryan influx into the Punjab, there were seven rivers, so that the region was named Sapta Sindhua, or the land of the Seven Seas. The Saraswati dried up, the Indus was excluded from the region; and the remaining five rivers led to the naming of the region as the Punjab, a land of great antiquity. It was the cradle of Harappan civilization which flourished between 2500 B.C. and 1500 B.C. Kurukshetra, the famous site of the battle between the Kauravas and Pandavas, was situated in the Punjab. It was also the place where Lord Krishna gave the world- famous message of the Bhagavada-Gita. This region was known as Madra Desh, named after Madri, the mother of the Pandavas. The composition of the Rig - Veda, the most ancient of the sacred texts of Hinduism, is associated with the land of the Five Rivers.

Khushwant Singh presents a comprehensive account of the causes and consequences of the birth of the Sikh religion under the pious and dynamic spiritual leadership of Guru Nanak, who founded this new faith in an attempt at a synthesis between ancient Hindu religion and the newly advancing faith of Islam. Khushwant Singh has skillfully offered interesting meeting ground between Hinduism and Islam: for instance,

the Bhakti cult as Hinduism's compromise with Islam and the Sufi mysticism as Islam's compromise with Hinduism as preparatory background for the birth and growth of Sikhism. But the critic cannot ignore the fact that Sikhism is very much closer to Hinduism than to Islam. This is true in all respects, though there are very many and deep difference: for instance, the monotheism of the Sikhs as opposed to the polytheism of the Hindus. The Sikhs are culturally much closer to the Hindus than to any other religious group in India, though their religious beliefs and ideas have been deeply influenced by the teachings of Islam. Khushwant Singh's notion
that the Bhakti cult was Hinduism's answer to the argument of Islam is only partly true, because the origins of this movement go back to the period when Islam had not even come into existence. It is true, however, that the Bhakti movement spread and developed after the advent of Islam.

The religious and political situation in fifteenth-century Punjab was particularly propitious for the birth of the new Sikh faith. While the Muslim conquerers from the northwest carried on, fanatically, their mission of mass conversions to Islam and the destruction of idols in Hindu temples the Hindus in their turn had staunchly reverted to a rigid caste-based society denying social justice to the lowborn. Politically, the Punjab was in turmoil. Taimur’s invasion of India in 1398 A.D. and the consequent cruelties and massacres had reduced the Delhi sultanate to political nullity and the time was ripe for a radical change in terms to religious awakening and beliefs and also in terms of centers of political power.

Against this background the birth of Guru Nanak and his rise to moral and religious eminence assume special significance. Nanak was a precocious child who learned Hindu scriptures and also Muslim religious texts. He had a large following, especially among the hardy peasants of the Punjab countryside. Mardana, one of Nanak's eminent emissaries, was a Muslim, who kept the torch of his Master's message burning. Nanak had a mysterious experience, and, it is believed, he received the robe of honour from the hands of God Himself. He travelled widely in India and Asia. He was a very sensitive poet and sang religious hymns with great passion and power. He chose Lehna as his spiritual successor in preference to his son, Sri Chand. Lehna came to be known as Angad and succeeded Nanak as the next Guru after the founder's demise at Kartarpur on September 22, 1539.

Although Khushwant Singh describes Guru Nanak as the King of Holy Men
in the Punjab, his portrayal of the founder of Sikh faith is extraordinarily objective and seems admirable in the light of the great deal of adulatory and even superstitious biographical material found in the writings on Sikh history and on the life of Nanak. Gopal Singh, in his biography of Guru Nanak, describes the saint's career as an accountant at the court of Daulat Khan, the nawab of Sultanpur. When Nanak reached the sum of thirteen, it is said, writes Gopal Singh, he would repeat the "word a million times, saying, "Tera, main Tera". Gopal Singh also refers to the sudden and mysterious disappearance of Nanak for three days on the bank of Wayyain, where he is to have experienced a trance. Khushwant Singh's portrait of Guru Nanak, compared to that presented by Gopal Singh, is singularly free from any attempt to make folk beliefs appear as fact.

Guru Nanak declared his firm faith in monotheism, that God is one, and, therefore, he deviated from the teachings of the Bhaktas who believed in reincarnation. Consequently, Nanak was a firm opponent of idol worship of the Hindus as it was linked with polytheism and the concept of God in human form. For Nanak God was “sat”, both “Truth” and “Reality”. This view of God forms part of the daily morning prayer of the Sikhs known as japji and is a cardinal principle of Sikhism. For the Sikh, God is truth, and, therefore, man must strive to follow His divine message in his daily life and in his relationship with his fellow men. Nanak emphasized the doctrine of action, or Karma-Yoga, as a way of living, which has profoundly influenced Sikhs all over the world. Sikh religion also conforms to the theory of Karma, and the idea of the transmigration of the soul from one life to the other until it is merged with the divine soul, which signifies the attainment of Mukti, or salvation. It is obvious that the Sikh religion has a great deal in common with Hinduism, and this is particularly true in respect of their attitude to the cow, which is held in veneration equally by the Sikhs and by the Hindus.
The institution of ten Sikh Gurus is an essential element of the Sikh faith since the Sikhs believe that the Guru, or the spiritual Master, is necessary for the preservation of faith, for enlightenment of the Scriptures, and for dispelling all doubts and temptations of agnosticism and atheism. The Gurus are, however, only human messengers of the divine, not incarnations of God. The Granth Sahib written by Arjun, the fifth Guru, is called the Adi Granth, to distinguish it from the work of Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru. The institution, functions and mission of the ten Gurus are now replaced by the efficacious Granth Saheb, and the readers of this sacred book are called Granthis. The Granth is a voluminous religious book since it contains more than six thousand verses and hymns. It is now the only object of Sikh religious worship and devotion.

Khushwant Singh traces in great detail the transformation of the peaceful Sikh community adhering to their pious theological beliefs into an explosive, expanding force and an assertive religious faith under the impact of the severe and ruthless persecution by Muslim invaders and rulers, especially Aurangzeb. The changeover from a pacifist role to an all-expanding military Khalsa of the Sikhs was brought about by the persecution and executions of Banda Bahadur, his five-year-old son, Ajai Singh, and others, leaders and followers, during the oppressive Muslim regime. Under the inspiring and militant leadership of Guru Gobind Singh 'a new people were born" in the Punjab: bearded, beturbaned, bangled, fully armed with Kirpan, with a crusader's zeal to raise a new commonwealth, they created a new social and religious order which was to play a dominant role in the history of the land of five rivers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In spite of Ahmad Shah Abdali’s nine Afghan invasions of the Punjab, Delhi, and northwest India, the rising power of the Sikhs could not be curbed. Abdali, as Khushwant Singh rightly points out, was "the bitterest antagonist of the Sikhs," but
at the same time, quite paradoxically, he was also their "greatest benefactor" since his ruthless plundering of property and inhuman massacres of innocent men and women only sharpened the edge of Sikh resistance and strengthened their determination to be free from alien rule. The Sikhs in their turn, by their ruthless acts of robbery, degraded the misls from the position of battalions of freedom fighters to that of mere gangs of robbers. They unleashed a reign of terror which antagonized the peasantry. Yet on the whole the hundred years, subsequent to the formation of the Khalsa or military command of the Sikhs, gave rise, in spite of many violent deviations, to the "resurrection of the spirit of Punjabi nationalism"Khushwant Singh believes that this period led to the advent of the Khalsa commonwealth and the rise of Punjabi nationalism which embraced all communities-Hindus, Muslim. Sikh-and that Sikh leaders regained the confidence of Muslim peasantry to project the notion that the Punjab would be better off if ruled by the Punjabis themselves than if it remained under the imperial control of Delhi or of the alien power of the Afghans.

Though this perspective has limited validity in relation to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, subsequent events have exploded the myth of Punjabi nationalism. Whereas Punjabi Muslims have taken a leading part in the formation of Pakistan, at present, by arousing the jealousies of Sindhi and Bengali Muslims, they seem to endanger the emotional homogeneity of that country. The Sikhs have successfully campaigned for a Punjabi nationalism comprising all creeds and communities would appear to have come to a tragic, though inevitable, end.

Whereas there was large-scale discontent in India against the British rule on the eve of the great uprising of 1857, caused by the short-sighted and repressive policies of Lord Dalhousie and a host of British viceroy, the Punjab was comparatively less disturbed and, therefore, was not in the forefront of the fight
against the British. Salaries of Indian sepoys were poor, and their economic discontent was aggravated by serious violence of religious susceptibilities. The policy of annexing Indian states to the growing British territory created grave dissatisfaction with British rule, which finally led to the great mutiny, or the major war of India's liberation. The story of the new Enfield rifle that its cartridge grease was made of cow's fat or pig's fat was readily believed in, and thousands of Indian soldiers rose in revolt against the British as Cawnpore, Lucknow, and elsewhere. The Marathas took a leading part in this armed revolt, and the names of the Rani of Jhansi, Tatys Tope, and Nanasahib Peshwa assumed heroic significance. Although the mutiny was finally overcome, the Indians dealt a heavy blow to British prestige and pretensions, and the outcome was the end of the rule of the East India Company and the assumption by the crown of direct governance of India in 1858. Queen Victoria was then proclaimed empress of India.

The Sikhs' response to the Indian risings against the British power was lukewarm because they were great beneficiaries of British hegemony. On Marh 29, 1849, a durbar was, however, held in Lahore fort and Maharajah Dalip Singh “stepped down from his illustrious father's throne-never to sit on it again.” The Sikh peasants also remained cool toward their aristocracy because they had greatly benefited from the administrations of John Lawrence and the Board. The Sikh farmers and soldiers laid down arms which were in their private possession in response to the orders of the British and consequently were recruited into the army in large numbers. Many government measures alleviated their suffering and removed substantially the causes of their economic discontent. Moreover, the Sikhs did not look favorably on the prospects of the revival of either Mughal rule or of Maratha power. Therefore, they became loyal allies of the British in suppressing the Mutiny of 1857 and in restoring peace and order to strife-torn India. They were amply rewarded by the British administration by the allotment of
large tracts of land in the canal colonies, which brought them unprecedented prosperity. The fallow lands of the Doab and other areas in the Punjab were turned into flourishing fertile farms by a network of canals. This great economic prosperity also resulted, not merely in stabilizing Sikh society, but in substantially increasing its numbers and power. The decline of the power of the Khalsa and Durbar had in the early days resulted in many halfhearted Sikhs returning to the Hindu fold or identifying themselves with the Hindu forms of worship and ways of life. This flow of renegades was successfully checked by the growing prosperity of Sikh peasantry and also by the advantages of being a Sikh for recruitment to the army. Places in the army were liberally offered to Jat Sikhs by British. The most important decision of Commander Hodgson was to preserve unimpaired in the army the sanctity of the Sikh paol which implies that "the Sikh should be permitted to wear his beard, and the hair of his head gathered up, as enjoined by his religion". This emphatic assurance of preserving Sikh identity and status further strengthened the Anglo-Sikh alliance.

Khushwant Singh traces the growth of various religious movements in the Punjab: the Nirankaris were followers of Guru Dyal Das, who was a Hindu Sikh opposed to idol worship and who had a considerable following in the northwest provinces. The Radha Swamis of Beas, another sect, founded by Shiv Dayal of Agra was a further attempt at synthesizing Hindu religious beliefs with Sikhism. Radha-Krishna's consort, symbolized the soul, whereas Swami, or the Master, embodied the Divine. The Radha Swami thus cherished the union of the soul with divine power. The Beas Sect branched off as a separate group from the parent Agra fraternity. The Namadharis of Kuka movement, which spread in the frontier areas, helped to bring about changes in the forms of worship. The Namadharis were dancing dervishes (wanderers) who chanted hymns and even worked themselves
into a religious frenzy, shrieking loudly as they danced. The growth of industrialism and a commercialized society has tended to level these intercaste differences among the Sikhs in recent years.

Khushwant Singh's endeavour at presenting the origin and growth of Sikhism and the many-sided development and achievement of this illustrious community over the five centuries is commendable in spite of several inevitable failings. Although a critic has declared that Khushwant Singh's work is "both too detailed for the general reader and too inexact to satisfy the scholar" I feel that it is a great effort toward presenting a definitive history of the Sikhs. Khushwant Singh could have perhaps avoided the accounts of border clashes of the 1840's, which repeat many nineteenth-century misconceptions of India's history. Many new documents and fresh materials have been made available in Himalayan Battle-ground: Sino-Indian Rivalry in Ladakh by Margaret Fisher. Khushwant Singh's account of the divisions among the Sikhs themselves is more penetrating and objective than Baldev Raj Nayar's presentation in Minority Politics in Punjab. Hafeex Malik reacts adversely to Khushwant Singh's assessment of the Muslim response to Ranjit Singh's rule. Khushwant Singh does not take not of, says Malik, many authentic works on contemporary history and relies solely on Mirza Hairat Dahlavi's Hayat-i-Taiyaba, which, it is believed, is not quite reliable. In the bibliography Dahlavi’s book is shown as a Persian work, whereas it is actually written in Urdu.

These minor flaws notwithstanding, Khushwant Singh's work is the true saga of a great people. In its perspective on the Arya Samaj, it offers new insights. It is not that Khushwant Singh's attitudes are always objective: he does not take a very liberal view of the Arya Samaj or even of the present-day secular India. His contention that the Hindus, "who form 80 percent of the population, will in due course make Hindusim the state religion of India, " is open to grave doubt and
seems to be a complete misreading of the secular character of Indian political and social conditions in general. One must admit that India offers far greater freedom of expression to its people than that which some of the Western democracies give to their people; in any case, this is proved by Khushwant Singh's own criticisms of Indian government and people. He seems to be a severe critic of Indian policies. The homeland that he advocated so passionately has come to stay, and the Punjabis, who clamored for a state of their own, have got it. What they make of it remains to be seen, however. One can only hope that Sikh religion and traditions will thrive in this new Jerusalem. But will they, indeed? Only the future will provide the answer. I have serious doubts about the possibilities of the growth of true Sikhism and its glorious traditions in a predominantly Punjabi state for the simple reason that it is only a challenging situation that has brought out the best among the Sikhs through the last five centuries. Khushwant Singh, along with other Sikh historians, has sufficient grounds to realize that it was not after all the Anglo-Sikh alliance that transformed their cherished ideal of a Punjabi state into an achieved ideal but the government of India which finally created it with a lovely capital at Chandigarh. The Sikhs sided with the British in the 1857 mutiny and fought many gallant battles in the 1914-18 and the 1939-45 wars only to be unceremoniously brushed aside at the time of India's Partition. These are incontrovertible facts of history, but Khushwant Singh does not seem to condemn sufficiently this aspect of the British role in recent history. The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement frankly admit the British failure to take note of the Sikh sentiment at the time of the liberation of Gurdwaras in as much as Jawaharlal Nehru failed to realize the depth of Sikh sentiment in 1960-61 for the creation of a Punjabi Suba, since he refused to grant it then. Against this, the government of India headed by Indira Gandhi is far more friendly and sympathetic to the Akalis than any other government in India of this century.
In a perceptive review of the two volumes of *A History of the Sikhs*, Nigel Cameron calls the principal feeling underlying this comprehensive work "tragedy." All through their history, the Sikhs from the days of the early Mughal and Muslim persecution to the present day of the threat of their absorption into Hinduism, had to face, it is said, a tragic destiny. While fully realizing the genuine element in this interpretation, I feel that the Sikh destiny is not tragic. On the contrary, it represents the truly Punjabi spirit, the consciousness of firmness and determination to face the evil, and an attitude of affirmation before the stimulating challenges of life.

Khushwant Singh's scholarly and comprehensive presentation of the long and chequered history of the Sikhs is written with passion and power and is characterized by objectivity, equipoise, and fidelity to truth. Only a liberal Sikh could have written this history with such sympathy and inward understanding. One of the main virtues of the work is that it is permeated by genuine Punjabi consciousness, and yet it is not tendentious. It amply demonstrates the truth that history is not an accurate record of a dead past or of inert facts; it is a living organism, pulsating with life. It is also a vital link between the past and the present, which are unified in a continual sequence of national history.