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The Hardy Boys, Before Exile

Lives of an inimitable people, documented in inimitable Khushwant style



The Hardy Boys, Before Exile The Hardy Boys, Before Exile

Manohar Singh Gill

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If I am not mistaken, Khushwant and Raghu had done a small book on the Sikhs as an introductory primer long ago. This is a much more ambitious effort for the coffee tables, away from the Punjab, particularly beyond India.

The Sikhs are ideal coffee-table material. The nearest thing to Moses' biblical prophets, with powerful, well-cut features, long, flowing beards, arrogantly curling moustaches, turbans more colourful than women's dupattas, and wicked grey, green or even blue eyes. With a sword or a spear thrown in, these tall, strapping men would melt any heart. Khushwant's essay—easy to read, lucid, in simple language, a thought process and descriptive flow like the Punjab rivers, is pitched at readers beyond Punjab. Even as a Sikh, however, I find his simple story of a people, Guru Nanak's beautifully translated poetry and the essence of their beliefs, educative. In a short essay, he has done a balanced survey of the history of the Sikhs from the slow emergence of a new faith, its essential beliefs, rituals and practices, its struggle against the long-established Mughal authority, its eventual rise to power in the northwest and demise after a short 50 years of rule at the hands of the British

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Introduction
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in 1849. The struggle of this minority to find a space for itself under the British and in independent India has also been well-sketched. Being Khushwant, he hasn't hesitated to take head-on the question of the Sikh role in the 1857 mutiny or war of independence, depending on one's point of view. I personally agree with him. The turmoil in the Punjab in the 1980s has also been bluntly addressed. Whatever the ups and downs of the Sikh people over the centuries, Khushwant, of course, loves to bring out their eternal optimism and love of life. In fact, I think a lot of it Khushwant has created in their favour. To a reader beyond India, the essay gives a clear introduction, and a desire to do some more serious reading on this small biblical army, not just surviving but flourishing against every odd, in one pocket of the world and a bit beyond. It is only the Sikhs who can produce men like the late Dharti Pakkad Singh, the eternal candidate in all Indian elections, or Lord Iqbal Singh, the laird of Glasgow, who has even had a properly designed and officially approved tartan, produced for the Sikhs. When I go to the UK in July, I must call on his Lordship and get my bolt of cloth from him.

Raghu has been photographing the Sikhs for long decades. He relentlessly travels through the Punjab countryside, visiting the farms, and pursuing the Nihangs on their marches across the land to get the perfect shot. He is obviously besotted with this people. I suspect somewhere deep down he has a hidden desire to put on the blue robes, tie the great yellow turban, get himself a decent Amritsar spear, a tolerable nag, and go riding around Punjab's countryside on some Don Quixote mission. Raghu, do it if it's your heart's desire.

The photographs are superb. How can they be otherwise coming from this man? I personally like the powerful features of these men and women, the expressions of self-belief, self-confidence, and even devilishness. I happened to be crossing over to Lahore last year when I ran into Raghu at the Wagah border, taking pictures for this book. I find his Wagah picture the most interesting and brings home to me how border policemen of both countries are projecting juvenile, perpetually-maintained hostilities. If only we would grow up and away from all this. The people on both sides of the white line badly need a hope and possibility of a good, peaceful life.

I only wish Raghu had added more variety to his pictures. What about the sportsmen, the politicians, social workers, the farm labourers, the factory technicians so good at handling machines? The Nihang, the farmer and the Granthi are not the sum total of the Sikhs. A book on the Sikhs has to look at their struggle in foreign lands—Pardes. I have seen them with sad faces in Southall pubs or on Toronto roads. The hunger for the



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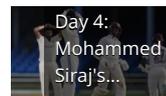


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land of the five rivers, and the sadness at being away from it is visible wherever I go in the West. Yes, they have the money, but their eyes are a little sad and their talk over drinks a bit maudlin. Also, what about the Sikhs in the terai, what about people like me and mine, in the Chambal badlands? I am of the Punjab and out of it too. I know, sitting in Shivpuri, what they miss. I was once told of the lonely Sikh somewhere in Brazil, farming away. What about Yogi Bhajan in New Mexico? The next edition of this worthwhile book must focus on Sikhs everywhere, because they're no longer of the Punjab only. The search for a living has taken them to far-off lands.

(The author is India's former chief election commissioner.)



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