

# Delhi

A NOVEL



KHUSHWANT SINGH



‘I RETURN TO DELHI AS I RETURN TO MY  
MISTRESS BHAGMATI WHEN I HAVE HAD MY FILL  
OF WHORING IN FOREIGN LANDS ...’

Thus begins Khushwant Singh’s vast, erotic, irreverent magnum opus on the city of Delhi. The principal narrator of the saga, which extends over six hundred years, is a bawdy, ageing reprobate who loves Delhi as much as he does the *hijda* whore Bhagmati—half man, half woman with the sexual inventiveness and energy of both the sexes. Travelling through time, space and history to ‘discover’ his beloved city, the narrator meets a myriad of people—poets and princes, saints and sultans, temptresses and traitors, emperors and eunuchs—who have participated in [and been witness to] the major historical forces that have shaped and endowed Delhi with its very special mystique... And as we accompany the narrator on his epic journey we find the city of emperors transformed and immortalized in our minds for ever.

Cover photograph by Prateek Raghav

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DELHI: A NOVEL

Khushwant Singh is India's best-known writer and columnist. He has been founder-editor of *Yojna*, and editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, the *National Herald* and the *Hindustan Times*. He is also the author of several books, which include the novels *Train to Pakistan*, *I shall Not hear the Nightingale*, *Delhi* and *The Company of Women*; the classic two-volume *A History of the Sikhs*; and a number of translations and non-fiction books on Sikh religion and culture, Delhi, nature and current affairs. His autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, was published in 2002.

Khushwant Singh was a Member of Parliament from 1980 to 1986. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974, but returned the decoration in 1984 in protest against the storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army.

Delhi

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*a novel*

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**This novel, which took me over twenty years to write, I dedicate to  
my son Rahul Singh and his friend Niloufer Billimoria**

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## **Foreword to the Paperback Edition**

I cannot yet believe that the first hardcover edition of my novel sold out before a copy was available in the book-stores. Or that a second and a third edition should have to be printed within a fortnight of the first. It is enough to turn the head of any writer. It has mine.

It took me twenty-five years to piece together this story spanning several centuries of history. I put in 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 tell my readers what I learnt about the city roaming among its ancient ruins, its congested 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. The readers' response has been most gratifying and gives me hope that I may achieve my object.

*New Delhi*  
*July 1990*

*Khushwant Singh*

## **A Note from the Author**

In this novel I have tried to tell the story of Delhi from its earliest beginnings to the present times. I constructed it from records chronicled by eye-witnesses. Hence most of it is told in the first person. History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid into it. It took me twenty-five years to do so. I am not sure whether I have succeeded in my venture.

Some chapters in an earlier draft were published in *Evergreen Review* of New York and *The Illustrated Weekly of India*.

*New Delhi*  
*15 September 1989*

*Khushwant Singh*

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Lady J.H.T.  
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Bhagmati

*I asked my soul: What is Delhi?*

*She replied: The world is the body and Delhi its life.*

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib