The Good, the Bad and the Ridiculous

Profiles

Khushwant Singh

with Humra Quraishi
THE GOOD,
THE BAD
AND THE
RIDICULOUS
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~ profiles ~

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About the Author
INTRODUCTION

I have never been a very tactful person. I have never been discreet either. I am a voyeur and a gossip. I am also very opinionated. These are good qualities to have if your aim is to be a writer who is read. You could add to that the extremely useful habit of keeping a diary.

I have met a good number of this subcontinent’s most famous (or infamous) and interesting people. I have also suffered famous bores, and sometimes been rewarded with behaviour so ridiculous that it becomes compelling. One reason why I have found myself around so many well-known people is that I was in professions which made this possible: journalism, law and public relations for India’s foreign missions. Another reason is that my father was a successful contractor and builder and he sent me to schools and colleges where the children of the rich and famous of the day studied. Several of them later became rich and famous themselves.

Through the latter half of my life, I have had the luxury of having some of the high and mighty of India, Pakistan and other neighbouring countries come to me. I have never understood why. It is true that I live in a comfortable flat in one of Delhi’s more pleasant areas, and I am generous with my Scotch. But I also insist that nobody should ring my doorbell unless they are expected, and certainly not before 7 p.m., and then I ask everyone to finish their drinks and bugger off before 8 p.m. Besides, I get easily bored and now, at death’s door, very easily tired. Still, people keep coming to spend time with me. Maybe they have nothing better to do. Or maybe they are being kind to an old man and want to keep him company—even if he would be happier without it.

I have seen prominent people at close quarters or been privy to facts about them that are not widely known. A lot of what I have observed or found out is not flattering, but I have never held back from making all of it public in my columns and books. If what is good in a person can be written about, why not the bad? I don’t do this out of malice, only out of my firm belief in being truthful. I cannot cheat myself or my readers. If I am proved wrong, I will gladly admit my mistake.

I have been criticized most severely for writing uncomplimentary things about dead people. No one seems to disagree with me that the person concerned was a windbag or a liar or a brute. Their objection is that I do not respect the dead. I find this hypocritical. Death does not wipe away the sins of nastiness or idiocy. A man should be judged in death as he would be in life. The truly good and the great are not diminished when their faults are exposed; on the contrary, they earn greater respect for rising to admirable heights despite their very human flaws.

I have no fear of people being nasty to me in print. If I cannot ignore the criticism
or venom, I join in the laughter. I wish everyone would do that. Instead, some of them get very angry. And when they cannot do you physical harm or prove you wrong by fair means, they take you to court for libel or worse. I should know. I had this done to me by Maneka Gandhi. She did not like the little that she read of my autobiography in a pre-publication excerpt in *India Today*. She went to court and got a stay on publication. Nothing that I had written was a lie, but it was her word against mine, and I was up against a legal system run by thin-skinned and humourless humbugs. I had to wait some years before my autobiography could be published, and only after some lines were deleted.

I don’t wish to be dragged to court again. Death threats don’t scare me, but I fear court cases that can go on for decades. There is enough in this book to inform, entertain and perhaps shock the reader. But, alas, I cannot name the large lady politician who told me of her passion for Rajiv Gandhi and hatred of Sonia for having cheated her of Rajiv’s love. Nor can I name the overrated poetess who seduced a legendary Urdu poet and songwriter only to find that he could not get it up. I cannot write about the Indian president who pulled out a bottle of premium whisky from under his bed and shared a drink with me. I cannot tell you what I have heard about a central minister’s love of al fresco sex, or a right-wing leader’s dealings with an underworld don.

To read all these stories and more, you will have to wait till I am dead and a suicidal publisher decides to print them. For now, enjoy this book of profiles of the good, bad and ridiculous people I have known over almost a century.
The day Ali Sardar Jafri died in Bombay (1 August 2000, at 8.30 a.m.)—an ironic death in a season of troubled détente—I made it a point to watch Pakistan Television to find out what it had to say about him. Jafri was not only in the front rank of Urdu poets in recent times but also the spearhead of the movement for rapprochement with Pakistan. PTV made a passing reference to Jafri’s death as a poet who wrote of the need for love and understanding between people. I was disappointed. I was also disappointed by the coverage given by the Indian media, both print and electronic. There was more to Jafri than the hastily written obituaries and collages put together to meet deadlines.

I had known Ali Sardar Jafri and his beautiful wife, Sultana, for over thirty years and, during my years in Bombay, we met each other almost every other week. Despite his commitment to communism, Ali Sardar liked the good things in life: good Scotch, good food and comfortable living. He lived in a pokey little three-room flat off Peddar Road. Apart from his wife and three children, who often stayed with him, he had two widowed sisters living in the same apartment. There was not much room to move about and many of his books were stacked under his bed, upon which he read, wrote and slept.

I would arrive armed with a bottle of Scotch; then Ali Sardar would send for soda and biryani from a restaurant, Allah Beli, facing his apartment. I sought out his company because he was one of the most erudite Indian writers I had met. He also had a phenomenal memory. If I quoted a line by any Urdu poet, he would come out with the rest of the poem. And explain every word by referring to Persian poets—from Rumi and Hafiz to Ghalib and Allama Iqbal.

When I set about translating Iqbal’s ‘Shikwa’ and ‘Jawab-e-Shikwa’, I travelled all the way to Bombay to seek Ali Sardar’s assistance. For two days, he and Sultana came to my hotel in the morning; we worked till lunchtime, when Rafiq Zakaria and his wife, Fatma, joined us to find out how it was going. After they left, we resumed our labours till it was time for our sundowners.

I often needled Ali Sardar about his communism. He had been a cardholder and had been expelled from the Aligarh Muslim University (which later gave him an honorary doctorate) and spent eighteen months in jail during the British Raj, and again
after independence, under Morarji Desai’s government. Although he had ceased to be a cardholder, he stoutly defended Marxist ideology. What was beyond my comprehension was that despite professing atheism, during the month of Muharram, he often wore black and attended Shia majlis and abstained from alcohol. During a television interview with me, wherein he expected to be questioned about Urdu poetry, I confronted him with his contradictory beliefs in both Islam and Marxism. He was visibly upset and fumbled for words, then took it out on me after the interview was over. He called me everything under the sun, stopping just short of calling me a bastard. Had he not been so obsessed with communism and social problems, I am convinced he would have been a greater poet.

Ali Sardar was also an incorrigible optimist. Inspired by Rumi’s line ‘Hum cho sabza baarha roeedia aym’—like the green of the earth, we never stop growing—Ali Sardar summed up his life story, ‘Mera Safar’, thus in a few memorable lines:

I am a fleeting moment
In the magic house of days and nights;
I am a restless drop travelling eternally
From the flask of the past to the goblet of the future.
I sleep and wake, awake to sleep again;
I am the ancient play on the stage of time—
I die only to become immortal.
AMRITA SHER-GIL

(1913–1941)

Women seduce. That is a fact. I have been seduced by women all my life, right from the time I was attracted to my first love, Ghayoor—it was she who had held my hand. Most women have made the first pass at me, led me on, with the exception of two women, wherein I took the lead. Even when I was attracted to a woman, I had little confidence to make the first move; instead, I was terribly flattered when women made a pass at me. Looking back, I wish I had the confidence to make the first move, for I could have got closer to several women, like the now legendary painter Amrita Sher-Gil. Amrita, you see, had threatened to seduce me. It happened in Shimla in the mid-1930s.

Amrita came into my sitting room (and my life) one day and introduced herself. She told me of the flat she had rented across the road, and wanted advice about carpenters, plumbers, tailors and the like. I tried to size her up. I couldn’t look her in the face too long because she had that bold, brazen kind of look that makes timid men like me turn their gaze down.

She was short and sallow-complexioned (being half Sikh and half Hungarian). Her hair was parted in the middle and tightly bound at the back. She had a bulbous nose, with black heads showing. She had thick lips with a faint shadow of a moustache. Politeness, I discovered, was not one of her virtues; she believed in speaking her mind, however rude or unkind it be.

As a baby, my son, Rahul, was in the playpen, learning to stand on his feet. Everyone was paying him compliments: he was a very pretty little child with curly hair, large, questioning eyes and dimpled cheeks. ‘What can ugly little boy!’ remarked Amrita. Others protested their embarrassment. My wife froze. Amrita continued to drink her beer without concern.

Later, when she heard what my wife had to say about her manners, that she had described her as a ‘bloody bitch’, Amrita told her informant: ‘I will teach that woman a lesson. I will seduce her husband.’

There were stories that Amrita had seduced many well-known characters of that time. People like the art critic Karl Khandalawala, Iqbal Singh and her nephew, the painter Vivan Sundaram, have written books on Amrita; Badruddin Tyebji has given a vivid account of how he was seduced by her—she simply took off her clothes and lay
herself naked on the carpet by the fireplace. Vivan admits to her having many lovers; according to him, her real passion in life was another woman.

Unfortunately, Amrita couldn’t carry out her threat of seducing me because she died a few months later. She was not yet thirty then.
I will never understand why Balwant Gargi committed adultery and then sat and wrote about it.

I don’t recall when I first met Gargi, except that it was at the home of a good-looking lass whom he had succeeded in leading astray from the straight and narrow path of matrimony. What had she found in him? He was a short, squat man who punctuated his talk with effeminate gestures and walked with a mincing gait, like one afraid of slipping.

Gargi was said to be a good playwright; but since he wrote in Punjabi and only rarely were his plays staged, few people knew his real worth. I did not read or watch any of his plays, but I did get to read an anthology of profiles: they were the wittiest pieces of prose I had ever read in Punjabi. They were obviously designed to hurt, and succeeded in doing so. Thereafter, every time Gargi produced a book, he lost a dozen of his close friends. He made up for the loss by acquiring new admirers. He was certainly an engaging talker and had the knack of surrounding himself with attractive women, successfully persuading quite a few of them that a Dunlopillo mattress was not what was necessary to make the bed an exciting place.

In his younger days, Gagi professed communism (we all did), then jettisoned it (so did we) and landed a job to teach Indian theatre at Seattle University. He produced an excellent book on Indian theatre in English; I complimented him on writing 300 pages on a subject that did not exist. He returned from Seattle with a lovely blonde American wife, Jeannie, and all of his friends fell in love with her. It was a misalliance. Gargi’s diet was literary sarson ka saag; Jeannie was American apple pie. Gargi wanted appreciation for what he wrote; Jeannie never bothered to learn Punjabi and was therefore unable to become a part of her husband’s claque. Gargi was gregarious, open-hearted in his hospitality, with not much in his kitty to be open-hearted about; Jeannie cherished the privacy of her home and could not stomach people dropping in at all hours. She also had an enormous appetite for food, which embarrassed Gargi for the simple reason that his friends might think he did not give her enough to eat at home. It was Gargi who took the irrevocable step to break up the marriage by committing adultery.

Gargi wrote an emotionally charged account of his lustful encounter with one of
his girl students in a garage, through the window of which could see his wife and children. It was a detailed and lusty account of the love-making, describing even the size of her breasts and her nipples. And that was the end of his marriage with the beautiful Jeannie.

In his semi-autobiographical novel *The Naked Triangle*, Gargi barely concealed the identity of the people he wrote about, and some were mentioned by their real names. There was the writer and film producer Rajinder Singh Bedi, recounting his affair with a nineteen-year-old girl who bared her bosom to him as a sort of introductory ‘how do you do?’—it made for nice erotica, but it does not need much imagination to know how the lady in the episode, Mrs Bedi, her children and grandchildren would react to this disclosure. The book was largely set in Chandigarh, and Punjab University’s academic circle was up in arms against him for having portrayed them with their shirts up, pants and shalwars down. Balwant Gargi was like a cactus—he hurt anyone he touched.

After his marriage ended, Gargi was a heartbroken man and lived in New Delhi under financial strain before shifting with his son to Bombay. In his later years, I was told, he was struck by Alzheimer’s disease.
In the early 1970s, I visited Pakistan twice to see how Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was doing, and how Pakistan was taking the drubbing of its army by the Indian forces in the 1971 war. The second of these visits turned out more interesting, as among the people I met was Begum Para. That meeting has remained one of my most memorable encounters.

I had first met Begum Para through Rukhsana Sultana, who was her niece and married to my nephew. One-time super-vamp of the Indian screen, Begum Para had put on a lot of weight after she married Nasir Khan (brother of superstar Yusuf Khan, a.k.a, Dilip Kumar). She had borne him two lovely children—a daughter and a son—and I had met them several times in Bombay when she was living there. Many a Sunday morning, the family would join me at the Gymkhana Club bathing pool to swim and have breakfast.

When Nasir died, he left behind very little besides a flat in Bandra and a couple of films. Now, Begum Para felt that she had a right to some of the millions that her brother-in-law was making; however, this was to no avail. So she frequently brought up the question of money: if anyone could loan her forty or fifty thousand rupees, she would say, she could have her old films rescreened and make a fortune. I didn’t take the hint.

In sheer desperation, Begum Para eventually abandoned Bombay for Pakistan, where she had a considerable inheritance waiting to be claimed. But it didn’t take her long to discover that her relatives were not willing to part with anything, and she was on weak ground, having earlier opted for India. She earned a little by flogging films she had brought with her and appearing on television. Her children too were unhappy; after the free and easy atmosphere of Bombay, the girl, who was rapidly growing into a beautiful young lady, found the puritanical atmosphere of Pakistan particularly stifling. They wanted rather badly to return to Bombay.

Begum Para had written me several letters, asking for help in returning to India; I wrote back that I would be visiting Karachi soon and we could talk the matter over.

When I arrived in Karachi early in the evening, Begum Para and her children were at the airport to receive me. So was the chief of protocol, as I was a guest of the government. We were conducted to the VIP lounge, where the children had their fill of cakes and biscuits. Once they were sent home, Begum Para accepted my invitation to
dine with me at the hotel where I was to stay the night. The chief of protocol dropped us at my hotel, and Begum Para accompanied me to my room.

I ordered soda and ice and took out the bottle of Scotch I had brought with me. There was, at that time, no prohibition in Pakistan. I had heard stories about Begum Para’s drink problem; she had apparently been forced to cut down on it because of the price: a bottle of Scotch cost twice as much in Pakistan as it did in India.

‘Would you like a drink?’ I asked her, unsure whether she was still a drinking woman.

‘I’ll take a little,’ she replied. ‘I haven’t seen genuine Scotch for ages.’

I poured out two stiff whiskies and handed her one. I was not even halfway through my glass when I saw that hers was empty. I poured her another one, which she tossed back instantly; I had to refill her glass once more before I resumed my own drinking.

By the time I had finished my quota of three large whiskies, Begum Para had had nine and the bottle was almost empty. I told her then that we must eat soon as I had to catch the early-morning flight to Islamabad. Reluctantly, she got up to go with me to the dining room.

The dining room was on the first floor and we had to climb up a spiral marble staircase to get to it. The place was crowded, but, as was usual in Pakistan, there were very few women there. People recognized Begum Para because of her appearances on television. It was quite evident that they were intrigued to see her in the company of a Sikh. She had another two whiskies before the soup was served. She had begun to slur over her words and her eyes had taken on a glazed look. She wanted to have yet another drink with her meal, but I put my foot down.

At long last, the meal came to an end and I got up to assist Begum Para with her chair. She stood up, swayed a little and collapsed on the carpet. The waiters came running to help her get back to her feet. I took her arm to help her walk to the stairs. All eyes in the dining room had turned to us, and I was doubly careful going down the spiral staircase. I gripped her fat arm. ‘One step at a time,’ I instructed her. We finally made it to the foyer. I ordered a taxi for her and waited patiently for the ordeal to be over.

A taxi drew up in the portico. I gave the driver a hundred-rupee note and told him to take the lady home. He recognized Begum Para and knew where she lived. I opened the rear door of the taxi and went back to help her. As she stepped forward, she missed her step and, once again, collapsed on the ground, this time with a loud fart. She had sprained her ankle and began to howl in pain: ‘Hai rabba, main mar gayee!’—Oh God, I’m dead!

A crowd had gathered, but no one came forward to help. Being an Islamic country, no unrelated male could touch a woman. I did my best to haul Begum Para up to her feet by myself. She was far too heavy for me. I pleaded with the taxi driver for help. My advance tip came in handy—he acquiesced. Together, we got Begum Para on her feet and pushed her into the seat. I slammed the door shut and bid her a hurried farewell, swearing to forever steer clear of divas given to drink.

That was my last encounter with Begum Para. But when I heard of her passing in 2008, I was deeply saddened, remembering only the pleasure of those shared Sunday breakfasts long ago in Bombay.
Sometime in 1980, I happened to be addressing a convocation of the Khalsa College in Amritsar. I noticed an old man with a scraggy long beard, an untidy white turban wrapped around his head, dressed in khadi kurta-pyjama, engrossed in taking notes on what I was saying. I could not take my eyes off him. He disappeared as soon as the convocation was over. Later, I asked the principal of the college, who was sharing the dais with me, about the old man in the front row. ‘You don’t know him?’ he asked in surprise. ‘That was Bhagat Singh of the Pingalwara.’

‘What was he writing while the speeches were going on?’ I asked.

‘He always does that,’ replied the principal. ‘If he hears anything worthwhile, he puts it in his newspaper published in Punjabi and English. In the Pingalwara, he has his own printing press.’

Bhagat Puran Singh had become a household name long before I saw him. On a subsequent visit to Amritsar, I noticed small, black tin boxes, with the word Pingalwara written in white on them, in different parts of the city. These had a slit on top, through which people could put in money. I learnt that Bhagat Puran Singh was to be seen on the steps of the Golden Temple as well, holding out the hem of his kurta for people to drop alms for his home for destitutes. It had also become a practice in many families to send money to the Pingalwara when there was a wedding in the house or in memory of a deceased family member. Neither the Punjab government nor the municipality gave him any financial assistance; it was only the people who gave him just enough to feed, clothe and render medical assistance to over 800 sick men, women and children abandoned by their families.

I was intrigued and determined to meet him. From Delhi I wrote to him seeking an appointment to visit the Pingalwara and talk to him. I got a reply in Gurmukhi, written in his own hand, asking me to come as soon as I could. Three days later, I was back in Amritsar. I took a taxi from the railway station and arrived at the Pingalwara.

The first thing Bhagatji asked me was: ‘How did you come here?’

‘By train from Delhi, then by cab from the station,’ I replied, somewhat bewildered by the question. Maybe he thought I had flown in.

‘You should have come by tonga or on a bicycle,’ he said quite firmly.

‘Where would I find a bicycle on hire at the railways station? And a tonga would
have taken more than an hour to get here,’ I protested.

Bhagatji gave me a dressing down: ‘Do you know how much poisonous gas a motor car emits and foul the air?’ He then proceeded to give me a long lecture on global warming and what it would do to human and animal life, forests and vegetation. He thrust some sheets of his newsletter in my hand, commanding me: ‘Read this, and this, and this.’

Clearly, he was somewhat of a crackpot. I love crackpots.

I went round the Pingalwara. It did not answer the requirements of modern hygiene. People were lying on charpoys with flies buzzing around. Lavatory stench, mixed with the smell of phenyl and food being cooked, pervaded the air. Volunteers scurried around, doing the best they could. It was evident that there was shortage of everything—food, clothes, medicines, staff. How much could one man do to help 800 people?

I made a nominal donation, gathered all the printed material Bhagatji gave me and returned to Delhi.

Back home, I wrote in my columns about Bhagatji’s dedicated service and the odds he was facing. I wrote to the Punjab chief minister and whomever else I could think of. The response was heartening. More money began to flow into the Pingalwara.

Thereafter, whenever Bhagatji came to Delhi, he dropped in to see me. I did not chide him for coming in a taxi but made a token offering, which he accepted without counting the notes. A receipt followed some days later.

Bhagatji’s work began to receive wider recognition. People began to make donations on a regular basis. Conditions in the Pingalwara improved and its activities expanded. No discrimination was ever made on grounds of religion or caste: the inmates included Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims; there were Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Harijans. Suffering knows no caste.

The last time I met Bhagatji was a few weeks after Operation Blue Star, which had taken a heavy toll of lives and caused extensive damage to sacred property. My reaction was immediate. Within twenty-four hours of the army assault on the Golden Temple, I had returned my Padma Bhushan to President Giani Zail Singh as a mark of protest. Bhagatji asked me if he should do the same with the Padma Shri he had been awarded in 1979; a week later, he relinquished the honour bestowed on him.

When Bhagatji died, I paid a tearful tribute to him in my columns. A few years later, I persuaded my brothers and sister to make a substantial donation on behalf of the Sir Shobha Singh Charitable Trust to the Pingalwara. It was graciously accepted by Dr Inderjit Kaur, who had taken over its management. Some months later, Dr Manmohan Singh, then minister of finance, accompanied our family to Amritsar to inaugurate a new block for patients in the Pingalwara.

It was impossible to meet Bhagatji and not feel inspired to contribute towards his mission in some manner, however modest—and his legacy of dedicated service to suffering humanity must be kept alive for generations to come. In living memory, Punjab has not produced as great a man as Bhagat Puran Singh.
During the years I spent at Government College, Lahore, in the early 1930s, I got to know a lot of people who later made it to the top—or near the top—in the film industry. Two years senior to me was Balraj Sahni; his younger brother Bhisham, B.R. Chopra and Chetan Anand were in the same class as me. Of them, closest to me was Chetan, who was quite a character.

Chetan was a pretty boy with curly hair and soulful eyes. He was much sought after by tough lads who fancied effeminate males; Chetan avoided them like the plague and attached himself to me. We walked from our hostel to the college together, sat side by side in our classes, played tennis and went to the pictures. Although tongues wagged, there was nothing homosexual about our relationship. Like me, Chetan too aspired to get into the ICS and came to England to sit for the exams. Neither of us made the grade. I returned to Lahore with a law degree; he had no more than the BA he had taken from Punjab University. Desperately looking for a job, Chetan spent a summer at my apartment. It was then that I saw another side to him.

Women found Chetan very attractive, and he had a unique method of ingratiating himself with them. On the hottest days in June, he would go out wearing his overcoat; with a stubble on his chin and a single flower in his hand, he would call on his lady friends. Inevitably, the dialogue would open with the young lady asking him why he was wearing an overcoat. ‘This is all I possess in the world,’ Chetan would reply as he presented her with the flower. He had phenomenal success with this approach.

In due course, Chetan succeeded in winning the heart of the most sought-after girl at the university, Uma Chatterji—though she was a Christian, she defied her parents and agreed to marry a Hindu boy who had no job. I threw a large party to celebrate their engagement, and discovered the fickleness in Chetan’s character: he flirted outrageously with all the other girls at the party! The next morning, when I reprimanded him and called him a ‘haraami’, he smiled disarmingly and brushed away my protests. Chetan and Uma were married and had two children. But Uma could not take his philandering after a point and left him; she later married the producer and arts collector Ebrahim Alkazi. Chetan, in the meantime, shacked up with a Sikh girl young enough to be his daughter.

Chetan and I kept in touch over the years. I wrote to him about his films (he only
made one good one), and he produced the son-et-lumière programmes at the Red Fort in Delhi, based on a script written by me. I heard from others that he had claimed to have written the text as well, but when I questioned him he denied ever having made such a claim. Later, of course, there were others who made similar claims.

When I moved to Bombay to take up the editorship of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the late 1960s, I was eager to renew my acquaintance with friends from my Lahore days, who had by now become big names in the film world. Most of all, I was looking forward to reconnecting with Chetan, since he had enjoyed my hospitality on innumerable occasions and had been one of my closest friends. I spent many weekends at Balraj Sahni’s villa in Juhu; B.R. Chopra asked me to his home a couple of times, as did Kamini Kaushal; once a week, I dined with I.S. Johar and his ex-wife, Rama Bans; even Dev Anand invited me to his home a couple of times, as did Kamini Kaushal; once a week, I dined with I.S. Johar and his ex-wife, Rama Bans; even Dev Anand invited me to his large cocktail parties. But Chetan Anand, whom I had expected to see more than anyone else, remained mysteriously unwelcoming. He only rang me up a few times, when he wanted publicity for something he was doing. Usually, he ended the dialogue with a vague ‘Kabhi humare ghar aana.’ I was very disappointed and angry.

A few months before I was due to leave Bombay, I ran into Chetan and his lady friend at a party. ‘Why haven’t you come to our home?’ she asked.

I exploded: ‘Because I have never been asked by that kameena friend of yours!’

People can be divided into givers and takers, suckers and spongers—Chetan Anand was the biggest taker and sponger I have met in my life.