

# Travel and travelling companions

## Shahid Alam goes for some fun reading

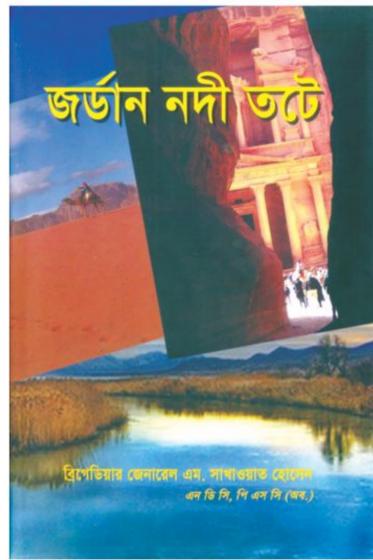
M. Sakhawat Hussain is a prolific writer. He has written on a variety of topics, mostly of a serious nature, with refreshingly light-hearted travelogues attesting both to his varied interests, and ability to generally write knowledgeably on the gamut of topics he chooses to focus on. *Jordan Nadi Tote* is the fourth of his travelogues, and the first to be set outside South Asia. As the title of the book indicates, the location is the Middle East, and is almost entirely concentrated on a country that, for some reason or the other, is less familiar with the average Bangladeshi than most other states of the region. Yet, as Hussain reveals, it is as important as any of the other vital countries of a region that is both strategically and geopolitically critical as well as having a primal religious significance for the three major world monotheistic religions: in chronological order of appearance, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact, during protracted periods of recorded history, it has been contested by a variety of large and small powers over the issue of an association between religious significance and strategic and geopolitical importance. Jordan fits in easily with that interface. But this review is not about the history of Jordan per se, although Hussain, like in his other travelogues, takes recourse to historical anecdotes to enhance the quality of his narrative. It is a good ploy, although the author states that some readers have complained that he takes recourse to history a little too much for their liking. Well, to each his/her own in reading taste, but, for me, Hussain's use of history actually spices up his writings.

I am a travel buff myself, but have always preferred visiting out-of-the-way places and meeting ordinary folk in order to try to understand, in however limited a form, what makes a particular country and its people what and who they are. And I like traveling by myself, with the occasional partner or two breaking the pattern. And I am a history buff. I just happen to agree with American chef and traveler Anthony Bourdain's promotional blurb on his upcoming show on CNN that he would prefer to stay away from cheesy tour guides spewing out the usual

rigmarole on "touristy" sites, and, instead, take in the sights, sounds, people, and places that he would find interesting. However, the reality is that most people need tour guides, and visit places that are "touristy". Hussain and his traveling companions of six (three couples) did have an efficient and endearing Jordanian guide, and they took in many of the recommended "touristy" destinations. And, by the author's account, all had a most satisfying tour, with their failure to visit the West Bank being their biggest disappointment.

So, why Jordan? As one of Hussain's traveling companions, Dr. Tanvir A. Khan, remarked at the end of the journey: why not Jordan? As already mentioned, it is a place where the three great monotheistic religions crisscross each other, and, inevitably, interact. One of the decisive events in human history, the Crusades, visited its soil. According to the author, 12 to 14 crusader castles exist on its present-day territory (as with the other countries of the Middle East, mainly due to the region's geo-strategic location, and the deep religious sentiments attached to it, there have been numerous changes in territorial boundaries, and countries have appeared on, and disappeared from, the map throughout oral and recorded history). Including the crusader castle Kerack, which Saladin had captured, and which Hussain and his companions had visited. Kerack (or Al Karak) castle is not to be confused with the more famous (in its time, almost impregnable) crusader castle in Homs, Syria, Krak des Chevaliers, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. They, however, did get to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site in Jordan, the truly wondrous Petra (Al Batra in Arabic), which housed the civilization of the ancient Nabataean Arabs.

Jordan is also the final resting place of 16 of Islam's prophets. Legend has it that even Hazrat Musa (Moses) lies buried here. What is indisputable, if only for purely geographical reasons, is that many prophets, including Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh), passed through the land of Jordan. It is also the eternal resting place of Abu Ubaidah,



Jordan Nadi Tote  
Brig. Gen. (rtd.) M. Sakhawat Hussain  
Palok Publishers

one of the military commanders of the most successful caliph of the nascent years of Islam, Hazrat Umar bin al-Khattab, under whose stewardship Islam made rapid inroads into the Byzantine Empire, Persia, and further east up into the southwest corner of Pakistan, and parts of northern Africa. It might be recalled that the architect of those victorious campaigns, Khalid ibn al-Walid, generally recognized as one of the greatest generals in military history, was removed by Umar (and replaced by Abu Ubaidah) primarily because he was very popular, especially with his troops. Hazrat Umar, as the author notes, lived a very simple life, in spite of being a very powerful ruler, and, after his army had captured Jerusalem, removed the ban on the Jews entering the holy city that had been imposed by its Christian rulers.

Jordan's capital Amman's history goes

back seven thousand years. The author notes that it has been well-preserved, its people take pride in its history, and eagerly show it off to the sizeable number of tourists that visit it each year. He then sadly (as well as indignantly) contrasts that scenario with the treatment of Dhaka city, which is just 400 years old, but is having to witness many of its historical sites being demolished forever. He does not believe that old Dhaka, an institution in itself, will survive another fifty years. Hussain, in a similar vein, ponders on the chivalry shown to each other by Saladin and Richard the Lionhearted, and laments that such people are no longer to be seen on the world stage. In Bangladesh's context, he remarks on how the leaders of the two major political parties do not even like to see each other. He turns philosophical as he recounts Field Marshal Allenby's insolence at Saladin's tomb, and American soldiers urinating on dead Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. The age of chivalry has long gone, Sakhawat Hussain!

The author at different times discusses the Arab character, and remarks on how the average Jordanian, relatively less well-off than most other Arabs of the region, is much more enlightened, sophisticated, courteous, and liberal in outlook. He takes time out to talk about the Arab Spring, during which time he was in Jordan, and wonders if it will one day overwhelm that country. Furthermore, he engages in a perfunctory discussion on geopolitics pertaining to that region, reasonably arguing that, if one has visited Jordan (for that matter, almost any country in the Middle East), one cannot but help write about regional conflict, Western diplomacy, geopolitics, and Israel. He mentions that Jerusalem is currently under the control of the Jewish state of Israel as being part of its "Promised Land" (by God) philosophy. Israel, in fact, is a country for the Jews, and hard-line Jews still dream of Eretz, or Greater, Israel, of which the realization of the "Promised Land" dream forms an integral part.

Hussain obviously had some interesting traveling companions. Some of their idiosyncrasies manifestly kept the whole

group in good spirits, an essential ingredient when traveling long distances. The most intriguing of them seems to have been Dr. Tanvir A. Khan. From all accounts, he is a formidable epicure, with a particular penchant for all things sweet, and an inveterate photographer. However, he displayed his limitations, as when he waded in to just about knee-height in pajama and kurta in the Dead Sea even after repeatedly being assured that he could not even commit suicide by drowning himself in that body of water. The likely explanation is that he did not know how to swim, and was going to take no chances of going deeper into the water beyond his self-imposed limit, reassurances or not, scientific proof or not! Equally fascinating is the story of Zakaria who, after having grandly announced that he had brought along with him an expensive swimming trunk bought at Gulshan market in Dhaka, he alighted on the Dead Sea beach in near-formal sartorial splendour!

Hussain talks about Col. T.E. Lawrence, or, more popularly, Lawrence of Arabia, and is not about to accept without question the Western, as well as Lawrence's own, account that he is the hero of Aqaba. He indicates that the local narratives regarding the Arab uprising of that period deserve closer inspection. A couple of confusing statements creep in. The author follows his statement that Giovanni Fantoni created the Serpentine Cross sculpture atop Mount Nebo in Jordan (from where Moses saw the "Promised Land") in the eighteenth century with one that says that he rebuilt in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, he identifies Wasfi Tel as a colonel in the Jordanian army soon after declaring him to have been a major. Travelogues should be fun reading. *Jordan Nadi Tote* provides that pleasure, but also dishes out some interesting history of one of the fascinating, if not as well known in Bangladesh as several other Arab nations, countries of the Middle East.

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# Of a multi-dimensional man

## Pallab Bhattacharya learns a few lessons

Every time Khushwant Singh writes a newspaper column or a book, his admirers fall over each other to lap it up. The nonagenarian journalist-author has ensured that they do the same with his latest book *Khushwantnama: The Lessons of My Life* (published by Penguin/Viking).

The book carries all the hallmarks of a Khushwant Singh bookhis candid views on a range of issues from women, sex, liquor, politics, Partition, writing, journalism and food, racy and lucid language and neatly-arranged thoughts.

Not a single of the 18 chapters in the book under different headings puts you off and there is something for everyone whether the reader is a food lover, enjoys his or her drinks, loves to read about sex, politics in the Indian subcontinent and more. He also airs his views on politics, politicians and the future of India; on what it takes to be a writer, contemporary print media and the challenges it faces from the onslaught of television news channels and on what religion means to him.

Reading *Khushwantnama* is like attending what Bengalis like to do so much 'adda'.

In *Khushwantnama*, Khushwant Singh has given us some of his trademark views. For instance, in the introduction to the book, he says that even at the age of 98, he considers himself lucky that he still enjoys his evening of single malt whisky, relishes tasty food and looks forward to the latest gossip and scandal. "I enjoy the company of beautiful women; I take joy in poetry and literature and in watching nature".

The writer feels sad he has always been a bit of a lecher and looked at women as objects of lust.

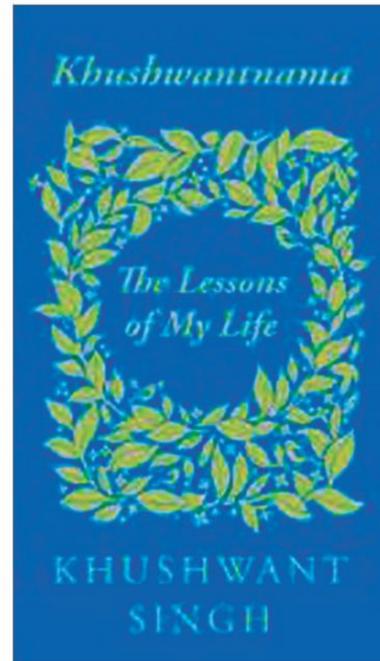
"In my 98th year, I have little left to look forward to, but lots to reminisce about. I draw a balance sheet of my achievements and failures. On the credit side, I have over 80 books: novels, collections of short stories, biographies, histories, translations from Punjabi and Urdu, and many essays. On the debit side is my character..." Singh writes in the book.

One of the most interesting comments Khushwant Singh makes in the book is in the chapter "The State of the Nation" where he writes, "If India is to survive as a unified and march forward, it must remain unified, reassert its secular credentials and throw out communally-based parties from the political arena. Though the liberal class is shrinking, I sincerely hope that the present and future generations totally reject communal and fascist politics".

Turning to politics in the Indian subcontinent, Khushwant Singh says,

"Pakistan seems to be crumbling faster than we feared.... and Bangladesh seems to be sitting on a time bomb which may explode anytime. We have to be prepared for the eventuality and the influx of more unwelcome refugees. We should keep things in mind when we vote for a government it should be one that is able to cope with these impending calamities".

Journalists and students of journalism would love to read the chapter "Journalism Then and Now", in which Khushwant Singh emphasises the value of not carrying any



Khushwantnama  
The Lessons of My Life  
Khushwant Singh  
Penguin/Viking

ideological baggage. He attributes his success as the editor of the now-defunct magazine "Illustrated Weekly" to his not carrying any baggage and "I came to it with a clean slate.... I never made any distinction between journalism and literature. They're both about communication..."

Khushwant Singh recalls that in his time as a journalist, "the editor was really the boss of his newspaper or magazine. Now there are national newspapers...but I do not even know the name of the editor because he no longer runs the paper it is

either the proprietor or the proprietor's children."

He also gives a tip or two about a good magazine or newspaper. "A good magazine or newspaper should be a cocktail of different things. It is a competitive market so you have to constantly think of your audience, your readers and their interests".

In the chapter "Thinking Aloud", Khushwant Singh talks about disparate thingspartition, liquor, sex, language, greed, qualities of a good president of a country. We find the writer saying, "I have always believed that sex is more important than romance" at one place; and then at another under the sub-heading, "The Qualities of a President", that A P J Abdul Kalam was "the best President we have ever had".

Khushwant Singh says he has slowed down considerably in the past year or so. "I tire more easily, and have grown quite deaf", said the founder-editor of "Yojana", a government of India magazine, and former editor of the National Herald and the Hindustan Times dailies besides being the author of books like "Train to Pakistan" (made into a feature film), "I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale" and "Delhi".

Khushwant Singh says he his life has had its ups and downs but he has lived it fully. He feels he has wasted precious time in "pointless rituals" and "socialising" and spending years of his working life as a lawyer and then a diplomat, until he took to writing. "I wasted many years studying and practising law which I hated. I also regret the years spent serving the government abroad and at home, and the years with UNESCO in Paris. Although I saw places and enjoyed life, and, having little to do, started writing. I could have done a lot more of what I was best at. I could have started my writing career much sooner."

Khushwant Singh's "biggest worry today is the intolerance he sees in the country. We are a cowardly lot that burns books we don't like, exiles artists and vandalises their paintings. We take liberties and distort history textbooks to conform to our ideas and ideals; we ban films and beat up journalists who write against us. We are responsible for this growing intolerance and we are party to it if we don't do anything to prevent or stop it."

All in all, "Khushwantnama" is an unputdownable book. Even if you don't agree with all the views of the author, he makes it a compelling case to take note of them. And that is where Khushwant Singh is a great communicator.

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, A SENIOR INDIAN JOURNALIST BASED IN DELHI, CONTRIBUTES TO THE DAILY STAR.

# The lessons of the past

## Shakhawat Liton dwells on the history of democracy

Is the country being democratised day by day? Or is it taking the shape of an increasingly undemocratic state, damaging all other institutions that contribute to a strengthening of democracy in a country?

Frustrated and annoyed by the prevailing political situation, anybody may answer: the country in no way is being democratised. Rather, an undemocratic system is taking roots in the name of parliamentary democracy.

The party in power leaves no stone unturned to ensure to ensure its win in parliamentary elections. The party in opposition on the other hand opts for waging street agitations for what it claims is ensuring the holding of free and fair parliamentary elections.

A free and fair election is valuable like anything to the opposition party as this is the only legitimate means to come by state power. The ruling party never thinks of free and fair parliamentary elections and always wants to return to power by holding polls in name only.

This mindset has given birth to all the street agitations waged by the opposition in the more than two decades which have gone by. This mindset gave birth to a non-partisan election time government following a vigorous street agitation between 1994 and 1996. And another spell of street agitation between 2006 to early 2007 contributed to the declaration of a state of emergency. And nobody knows for sure what is waiting for us after a few months?

Mustafizur Rahman Siddiqui, associate professor of Political Science at the University of Chittagong, describes the situation that prevailed in country's politics very well.

He has described briefly the movement for democratisation during the British and Pakistan periods which will help one understand how the titular democracy introduced by the British colonial rulers

increased people's consciousness and which in course of time prompted them to launch a movement for democratisation. He shows how the basic foundation of the movement for democratisation in Bangladesh was established in undivided Pakistan.

Professor Siddiqui analyses the movements for democratisation in independent Bangladesh during the rule of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, the two military rulers --- Zia and Ershad --- and also the democratically elected government led by Khaleda Zia.

It would have been better had Professor Mustafizur described in brief the history of the movements waged by the opposition parties in 2006 and early 2007 which led to the declaration of the state of emergency.

He might have plans to do so. If so, he may also briefly discuss the lack of movements within the parties to ensure intra-party democracy, which is now a demand of the times, and until and unless the major political parties ensure democratic practices within themselves, the state cannot be democratic.

However, this book will help in understanding the nature of the movements for free and fair elections. It will also help open a new window for others to carry out further research to bring in more results.

We do not have any other alternative, but to learn the lessons from our past failures and political turmoil to decide our future course of action. And in a true democratic polity, people always do that. They neither avoid nor suppress the past. This is one of the beauties of the democracy. Unfortunately, we, particularly our politicians, forget this truth. And it has been proved that forgetting the lessons of the past will in no way allow us to go forward.

SHAKHAWAT LITON IS SENIOR REPORTER, THE DAILY STAR

**DEMOCRATIZATION  
IN  
BANGLADESH**

Movements for Free and Fair Elections

Mustafizur Rahman Siddiqui

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