

## Review Of Barhi Koe Balda Deeva – Author Shivcharan Jaggi Kussa – Roop Dhillon



Punjabi Literature has had its fair share of good books and bad books. Sadly most of the writers of the Punjab who choose to write in Punjabi are either limited in their knowledge of the world beyond Village Literature or are clearly limited in exposure to modern world techniques and so are unable to capture the familiar in a fresh way or one up to international standards. This is not true of Jaggi Kussa and his book, Barhi Koe Balda Deeva – Outside, Somewhere, A Lamp Burns.

One can tell that SJK is well read and a deft hand at plot and characterisation. I assume that he has read Punjabi translations of international literature, such as Tolstoy. Although SJK lives in London, and thus is world wise, he always keeps his subjects close to his readership's heart. Despite my criticism above of other Punjabi writers, the readers are mainly going to only be interested in local matters, and that is what SJK does.

This is a time where Punjabi Literature is at a crossroads, where the old guard, writers and readers alike, are completely out of touch with India's new generation, their interest and ambitions. The threat to Punjabi of this is a staid set of stories and the established writers patting themselves on the back, producing a deluge of old hat, and fooling the public in thinking that they are somehow great writers. They are not. And nowadays the public is not fooled. They simply switch from Punjabi to Hindi, or more likely, English, with books such as Harry Potter.

There is a growing market for the same in Punjabi, but aside from the block from the old guard, a tragic danger is the Indian publishing system that fails to pay royalties, expects new writers to pay for their work, which any foolish printer can do, and have no idea when it comes to editing, of correct Punjabi Idiom, or use of unusual to Punjabi, but perfectly acceptable techniques to the rest of the world, such as not using commas, or periods, when trying to show a protagonist running out of breath, and making the reader do the same. This is a technique seen used by Roop Dhillon quite often, whilst writers like Des Raj Kali tackle social issues that Indians would rather stay blind to.

SJK is not quite part of this wave, but certainly uses modern techniques that make Nanak Singh, Gurdial Singh and Amrita Preetum look so out of date. The main thing is SJK's stories have pace, excitement and deal with social issues that others are afraid of or just incapable of.

In many ways the front cover, with its white Greek Tragic Mask merging into a carcass like rib cage, captures the mood of the novel., Barhi Koe Balda Deeva ( BKBD). BKBD follows the tragic life of a group of Sikhs from West Punjab, now Pakistan, who against any wish of their own are forced to leave for the new promised land, India, where instead of finding peace and acceptance, over time are abused, harassed and eventually tortured, killed or mistreated, for no other reason, than that they are Sikhs. A

group, including Giani Ji, Umli, Santu and Gurmukh Singh who along with their families are forced out of their home village, because it is now Muslim only Pakistan, to a Refugee Camp, where with thousands of others they are forced to wait weeks on end, to be allocated land, in the new country, taken from Muslims forced into Pakistan, in compensation for their old homes.

Tragedy begins here, as day in day out, they are mistreated by the camp Organisers and two “In Charges”, and finally given land, with one not sent to the same village. As a result they agree to always meet at Amritsar every year. Although this does not happen, Gianni Puran Singh enthusiastically manages to take all the layabouts, druggies and loafers from their newly allocated village away from their poor lives, into the Khalsa, by visiting the place annually. This habit soon gets him in trouble with the evil village Mayor, Jaggar Singh, who is jealous of the new arrival and labels him a Terrorist. Thus begins a new tragedy.

SJK created many characters in this short but epic novel, all who are well rounded and play their part in the ensuing and engaging tragedy. From Melo, a mad girl in the camp, rape victim of the partition, to Kulbir, 4 decades later to be killed in vile anti-Sikh attacks post assassination of Indira Gandhi. At different stages of the novel, one those mentioned so far become the focal point, thus lead characters, whilst the other protagonists fade to the background, until their experiences become relevant not only to plot, but reflecting the social ills placed upon the characters lives. Jaggar is sly and never exposed to anyone but the reader, infuriating us, as we can see what is to unfold, but the characters are blind to it. He is supported ably by a Police force more corrupt and evil than the criminals in the west, and a million miles away from the English Bobby. These are in the form of Thanadars Brar and Jag Singh who apparently torture and pick on Sikhs because it is an unspoken Government policy from Delhi. This is only ever implied, as SJK assumes the readers knowledge of twentieth century Punjab.

In the early stages of the novel we meet the protagonists named above, just as Partition hits India. It is clear that they do not want to leave their homeland for a new India, and think the idea of Pakistan is crazy, and no good to anyone but the Leaders. Alas events build up, and communal violence around religious identity erupts. Santu loses two sons. His wife, who also loved her Muslim neighbours, can not bear to part. Whereas most Partition novels deal with the atrocities of the same, this one focuses on the treatment of the refugees. When the In charge finally does allocate homes from them, we are shown how on entering the new home, it is cold and alien. Yet by the end of the novel, the home is full of memories which are bitter sweet for Gurmukh, in contrast.

One of the wonderful techniques used by SJK is how different protagonists come to the fore and take on aspects of the major events, as they impact on different lives. Santu is cajoled by his mother, a strong character in the early stages, to marry the rape victim Melo. He is reluctant, but when told of the fact she was made pregnant by her assailant, soon agrees for her honour. One starts assuming the child will clash with the father and we will go into a Sikh Muslim affair. That is not what happens. Instead Santu and his “son” fall victim to the anti-naxelite and Akali politics of the late seventies, having seen Punjab split further. Later this family take a back seat and Gurmukh’s family come to the fore, at a time when all Kes Dhari Sikhs are seen as the enemy. Like Santu’s mother, Umli puts in an important role in the beginning, but fades into the background, as the situations move on, like a fast train to 1984 and Operation Bluestar. Not the politics but the human cost. Throughout Giani Ji remains a major character uniting all the sub-plots, which are all linked through the evil Mayor as well.

Where necessary, SJK is economical with his words, where elsewhere he goes into detail. Whichever method he uses, he evokes clear stark images and moods within the readers mind and heart. The right choice of words, and the heavy use of conversation and colloquial language adds spice to the novel. Beautiful vivid language is used. He really understand the average Punjabi everyman, and the use of words tells us all we need to know about each character, acting as a window to their souls. To say anymore would give too much away.

I not only recommend this most excellent Punjabi novel ( The best I have read to date), but suggest that all his books should be explored. This author’s books must be translated in to Spanish, English, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi and Arabic. The world is missing out on what Punjabi Literature has to offer, and in terms of Novels, he is probably the best.