

# For the love of literature

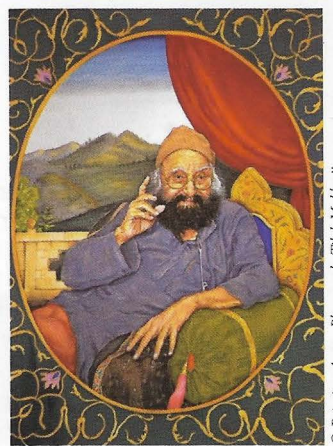
In view of the recently concluded Khushwant Singh Literary Festival, **Rahul Singh** charts the genesis and describes the essence of what is today considered to be one of the most sought-after literary events of India.

My father Khushwant Singh, who passed away a little more than five years ago, came to Bombay—as it was called then—in 1969, to take up editorship of the then-ailing *The Illustrated Weekly of India* of the Times Group. One of his first moves was to try and become a member of Bombay Gymkhana as he was an avid tennis player.

Those days, securing a membership was not as hard. It became even easier when his application mentioned that as an undergraduate, he had captained the tennis team of King's College London, and that it had won an inter-collegiate championship.

Another priority for him was to find temporary accommodation. When the Times management located a suitable flat for him, I was moving out of my paying-guest (PG) accommodation to go to London for a year. "Why can't I replace you as a paying guest?" he asked me. My landlord, the late Firdaus Jehangir, and his wife Amy, were somewhat startled when I conveyed my father's request but immediately agreed, adding that they would air-condition the bedroom he was to occupy. At that time, I think Firdaus was the squash secretary at BG. So, Sorab Mansion (now Rajesh Mansion), opposite Oval Maidan's Rajabhai Clock Tower, became my father's abode for

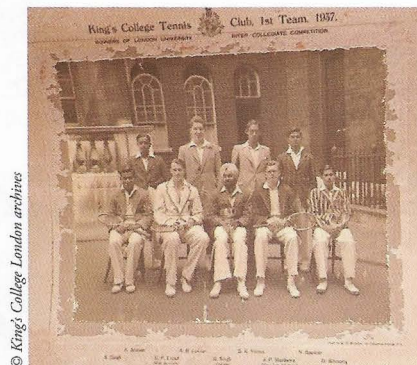
almost a year. From there, he would walk to the Gymkhana with his tennis kit, have an early-morning game and then proceed to the Times building, opposite Victoria Terminus.



A photograph of a miniature-style painting of Khushwant Singh

Cut to 40 years later: I have a family home named 'Raj Villa' in the Himalayan hill town of Kasauli, from where my father did much of his writing. In the summer of 2011, when he was too frail to make the journey from Delhi to Kasauli—he was 95 years old then—my

long-time companion Niloufer Bilimoria said, "Let's do a literature festival in Kasauli and name it after your father." The idea was bounced off Ananth Narayan, the brigadier (now lieutenant general), who was in charge of the Kasauli cantonment. Enthusiastic, he suggested that we picked the Kasauli Club—of which he was the chairman—as the festival's venue. That is how the Khushwant Singh Literary Festival (KSLF) started.



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Khushwant Singh, captain of the tennis team at King's College London

Just recently, we held it for the eighth consecutive year. One of the longest running



60 years in cinema: Sharmila Tagore in conversation with Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri





From left to right: Sudeep Sen, Shabana Azmi and Saif Mahmood

literature festivals in the country, KSLF has put the Kasauli Club on India's literary map, attracting many tourists to this enchanting town of Himachal Pradesh. From an initial audience of around 200 per session, we have grown to over a 1,000 a session. The Sharmila Tagore session this year, in which she spoke about completing 60 years in Indian cinema, attracted such a huge audience that the Club had to stop more people from coming in. Manisha Koirala and Shabana Azmi were big crowd-pullers too. Other celebrities and writers who have come to the festival over the years include Om Puri, Asha Parekh, Anupam Kher, Shatrughan Sinha, Milkha Singh, Bishan Singh Bedi, Shashi Tharoor, Karan Thapar, Rajdeep Sardesai, Rajmohan Gandhi, William Dalrymple, perennial gadfly Mani Shankar Aiyar, Mumbai's iconic healer Dr Farokh Udwadia, international rugby player and actor Rahul Bose and BG's very own Shobhaa De.

KSLF reflects some of Khushwant Singh's passions and concerns. It is also dedicated to educating the girl child, preservation of the fragile ecology of Kasauli and welfare of Indian soldiers. This time, the festival's theme was 'Saints and Sinners', which was centred on several important anniversaries of 2019, such as the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the 150th of Mahatma Gandhi, the 100th of Kaifi Azmi and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the 20th of the Kargil War. Khushwant Singh was born and brought up in what is now Pakistan, and was passionate about attempting to improve ties between India and Pakistan. So for the first few years of the festival, we had leading Pakistani writers, celebrities and politicians coming to Kasauli. Their sessions were packed. Sadly, that is no longer possible. One of them was the eclectic Fakir Aijazuddin, who once sent us a touching poem that I read out to the audience, many of whom later confessed that it

brought tears to their eyes. It reads as follows:

There was a time  
when Time evoked tomorrows,  
Today, it speaks only of yesterdays.  
Where has the promise gone,  
of brotherhood sans frontiers?  
Where are the tears we shed,  
the blood to irrigate an earth,  
once yours, now mine,  
once mine, now yours?  
Why must my only view  
of you be through  
the barrel of a gun?  
Why must I search for you  
in the debris of a divided sun?  
How long will this daily suicide last?  
Will we have separate heavens there?  
or find ourselves sharing  
another common hell?

With undivided love,  
F. S. Aijazuddin **BG**

### The literary mood continues...

If you missed attending KSLF, you might want to look out for Tata Literature Live! The Mumbai Litfest 2019, which will be held from November 14–17, 2019 at three of Mumbai's iconic cultural venues—NCPA, Prithvi Theatre and SPICE.

- The festival will be celebrating its 10th edition with writers such as Shashi Tharoor, Perumal Murugan, Tony Joseph, William Dalrymple, Jerry Pinto, Gauri Singh, Pankaj Kapur, Appupen, R. Gopalakrishnan, Shubha Mudgal, Alexander McCall Smith, Anthony Horowitz, Monica Ali, A. C. Grayling, Dave McKean, Ian Jack and many more.
- Watch performances, attend workshops, talks and book launches, and participate in the book swap.
- Attend the first Little Festival (November 15–17), curated for children.

Entry is free and open to all on a first come, first seated basis. Come and hear your favourite writers, meet them and get your copies signed!

For more information, visit [www.tatalitlive.in](http://www.tatalitlive.in)