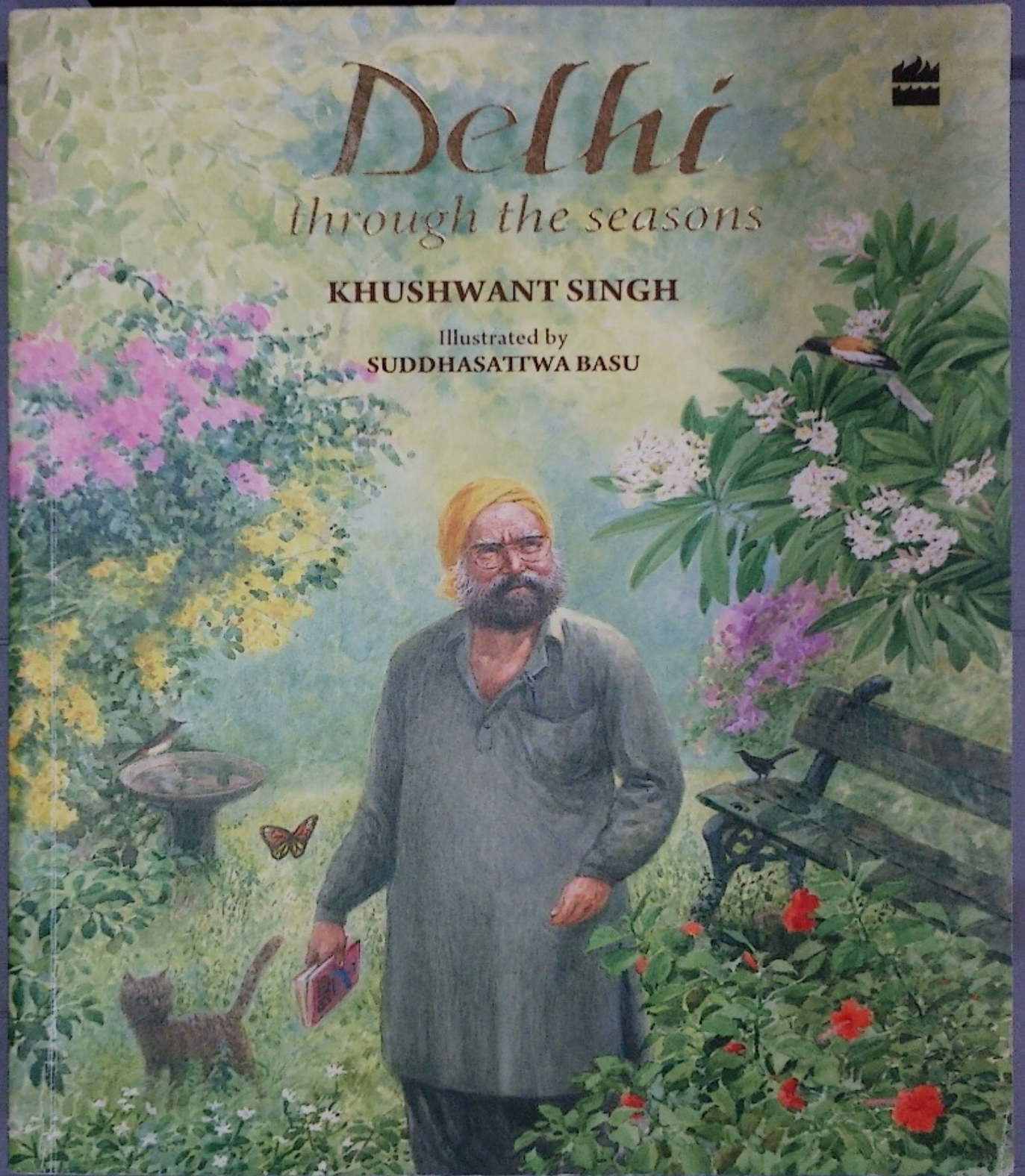


Delhi

through the seasons

KHUSHWANT SINGH

Illustrated by
SUDDHASATTWA BASU



A5

A4

Delhi

through the seasons

One of India's best-loved columnists and writers, **Khushwant Singh** (1915–2014), was the author of several novels, including the classics *Train to Pakistan*; *A History of the Sikhs*; and an autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*. He was the founder-editor of *Yojana*, editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Hindustan Times* and *National Herald*. A member of the Rajya Sabha (1980–1986), he was awarded the Padma Bhushan (1974) which he returned in 1984 to protest the siege of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan.

Suddhasattwa Basu is a painter, illustrator and animator. A student of Fine Arts (painting) at the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, Suddhasattwa has worked in the Design Unit of Thomson Press and has been closely associated with *Target*, the children's magazine. His love for and keen observation of nature and landscape also find expression in *To Live in Magic*, a book of nature poems and prayers for children by Ruskin Bond. Suddhasattwa is the director and chief animator of *Ghayab Aya*, India's first ingeniously made animation tele-serial, which was first telecast in 1990 on Doordarshan's national network.



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MAHARAJA AGRASEN COLLEGE
ICSSR Major Research Project
Delhi Diver-City, 2022-2024

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HarperCollins Publishers India



For Nandini with love



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In the Beginning

For the last many years I have maintained a record of the natural phenomena I encounter every day. However, my nature-watching is done in a very restricted landscape, most of it in my private back garden. It is a small rectangular plot of green enclosed on two adjacent sides by a barbed wire fence covered over by bougainvillea creepers of different hues. The other two sides are formed by my neighbour's and my own apartments. He has fenced himself off by a wall of hibiscus; I have four ten-year-old avocado trees, perhaps the only ones in Delhi, which between them yield no more than a dozen pears every monsoon season; and a tall eucalyptus smothered by a purple bougainvillea. There is a small patch of grass with some limes, oranges, grapefruit and a pomegranate. I do not grow many flowers; a bush of gardenia, a couple of jasmines and a queen of the night (*raat-ki-rani*). Since my wife has strictly utilitarian views on gardening, most of what we have is reserved for growing vegetables. At the further end of this little garden, I have placed a bird-bath which is shared by sparrows, crows, mynahs, kites, pigeons, babblers and a dozen stray cats which have made my home theirs. Facing my apartment on the front is a squarish lawn shared by other residents of Sujan Singh Park. It has several large trees of the ficus family, a young chorisia and an old mulberry. I have a view of this lawn from my sitting-room windows framed by a *madhumalati* creeper and a hedge of hibiscus. What perhaps accounts for the profusion of bird life in our locality

are several nurseries in the vicinity, the foliage of many old *papdi* (*Pongamia pinnata*) trees and bushes of *bhang* (*Cannabis sativa*) which grow wild. I have not kept a count of the variety of birds that frequent my garden but there is never a time when there are none. Also, there are lots of butterflies, beetles, wasps, ants, bees and bugs of different kinds.

There was a time when I spent Sunday mornings in winter in the countryside armed with a pair of binoculars and Salim Ali's or Whistler's books on Indian birds. My favourite haunts were the banks of the Jamuna behind Tilpat village; Surajkund, the dam that supplies water to its pool; and the ruins of Tughluqabad Fort with its troops of rhesus monkeys. There, I made acquaintance with water fowl, skylarks, weaver birds and a variety of wild plants like *akk*, *dehla*, *adusa*, mesquite, Mexican prickly poppy and lantana which grow in profusion all round Delhi.



January

For some people the year begins at the hour of midnight. They bid farewell to the old and usher in the new with revelry and song, bursting balloons and swilling champagne. For others it begins when the rim of the sun appears on the eastern horizon. For me it starts some time between the two, when I get up to place a platter of milk for a dozen stray cats waiting impatiently outside my door beside the morning paper which is delivered to me at 4.30 a.m. I do not feel the day has really and truly begun till I have read the paper, heard the BBC news and drunk a mugful of warm ginseng tea. Then I pull back the curtains of my window, switch off my table lamp and watch the black of the night turn to the grey of dawn. I hear spotted owlets screech in the mulberry tree, I catch glimpses of small bats flitting by. And the dawn chorus begins with the raucous cawing of crows followed by the chattering of sparrows and the shrill cry of kites. Sometimes, when it is still dark, I step out onto the lawn behind my apartment to gaze at the moon or the brightly shining morning star. I return to my study and switch on the radio to listen to the relay of the morning service (*Asa di vaar*) from the Golden Temple. When it comes to Guru Nanak's lines on the *semul* (silk cotton) to emphasize that the size of a tree has no bearing on what it yields, I know the morning service is half over and it is time for me to wake up my wife, who likes to take her morning walk in the Lodi Gardens at dawn. I get into my shorts to leave for my morning game of tennis. I have to first wipe the

dew off the window panes of my car because often the humidity is above 95 per cent. It is still dark. I switch on my headlights, scattering clusters of crows pecking at mangled remains of rats, cats and dogs run over by speeding traffic the night before.

My early morning drive to the Gymkhana Club and the hour and a half I spend there provide a feast for the eyes and ears. The Club grounds are full of tall trees. Since the side dividing the Gymkhana from the residence of the Prime Minister has for security reasons been closed to traffic, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of birds in the area. My morning game of tennis is played to the accompaniment provided by magpie-robins (*dhaiyal*), golden orioles, barbets, *koels*, peafowl and *papechas*. The bird orchestra varies with the seasons. Often, when I look up to take a lob, I miss it because grey hornbills, lapwings or pied cuckoos distract me.



Grey Hornbill

On New Year's day the sun comes up at 7.14 a.m. It can be very cold with temperatures falling below 5° centigrade; it rarely rises above 18° on sunny afternoons. The cold takes its toll of the undernourished and homeless poor of the country. Papers carry reports of people dying of exposure (the average toll is between 50 to 100 every winter). Morning mists (more in the category of smog) which begin around Christmas, persist till the middle of January and disrupt many airline schedules.

There is something odd about the length of days and nights. The winter solstice is on 22nd or 23rd December, with the shortest day and the longest night. Thereafter, days should get longer at the expense of nights, with the sun rising a little earlier and setting a little later. But it would seem that it does not happen that way. On New Year's day the

Koel

sun rises at 7.14 a.m. On the following day, instead of rising earlier, it can be later by a minute. At the other end, it sets at 5.35 p.m. on the first two evenings, thus adding a minute a day. By Republic Day (26th January) while it rises only three minutes earlier in the mornings, it sets as many as 20 minutes later (5.55 p.m.). Apparently this eccentricity is due to the elliptical shape of the earth. Or perhaps it wobbles as it pirouettes around the solar deity.

The festival of *Lohri* in mid-January marks the peak of winter. It is celebrated by lighting bonfires. Parties of children go from door to door, chanting doggerel verses with each line ending in 'Ho, ho!' and collecting money—it is India's version of Guy Fawkes day. By the end of the month our brief spell of cold and the winter monsoon are on the way out. It is not unusual to have a shower or two on Republic Day but I have rarely known the spectacular 'Beating Retreat' that follows two or three days later to be washed out by rain.

Green Barbet

Golden Oriole

Magpie-Robin

Pied Crested Cuckoo

Traditionally the winter season ends with the advent of *basant* (spring), which also usually falls in the second fortnight of January or early February. As the saying goes:

*Aayaa Basant,
Paalaa Urant.
(Spring is here; the cold has flown).*

For the rich and the well-to-do, who can afford to cover themselves against the cold and keep their homes warm, January is the best of months in Delhi: blue skies and sparkling sunshine. You can bask in the sun all day long. In the evenings, while the poor shiver under the culverts and flyovers, I sip my Scotch before a blazing log fire, then snuggle into a warm bed with a hot water bottle at my feet.

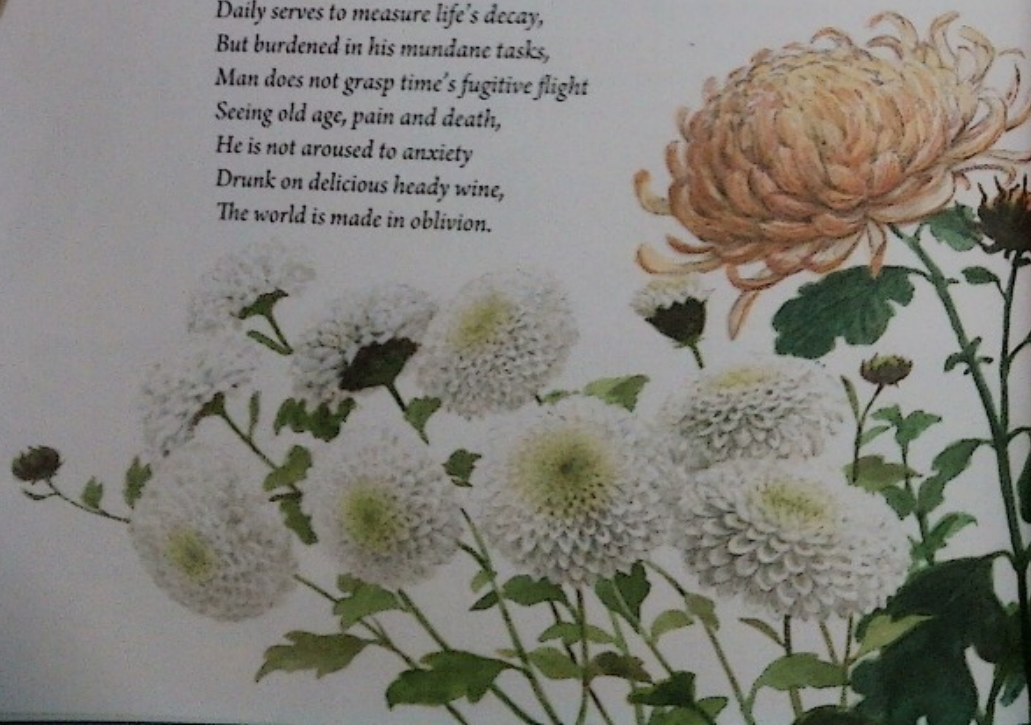
Bhartrihari describes the passage of days and years in ecstatic poetry:

*The cycle recurrence of sunset and dawn
Daily serves to measure life's decay,
But burdened in his mundane tasks,
Man does not grasp time's fugitive flight
Seeing old age, pain and death,
He is not aroused to anxiety
Drunk on delicious heady wine,
The world is made in oblivion.*



▼ Chrysanthemum

Poinsettia ▼



If you are looking for colour in January, go out into the countryside. The mustard is in bloom, spread out like a sea of canary gold. Its bitter-sweet odour attracts honey bees. Besides mustard, there are lentils, mainly *arhar*, sugarcane with its pampas plumes of pale russet, and young wheat. Skylarks rise from the green fields, suspending themselves in the air and pouring down song till they run out of breath, then plummet like stones and disappear in the verdure. By contrast, Delhi's parks and gardens are largely flowerless till the latter part of the month except for marigolds, poinsettias, chrysanthemums and bougainvillaeas. Delhi's Christmas tree is the poinsettia which persists through January; it is, as its Latin suffix indicates, truly *pulcherrima* (beautiful) with its bright red leafy flowers.

Flowers of the golden shower (*Pyrostegia venusta*) or flame vine creeper begin to appear hesitantly by the last week of the month. So do pinks, phlox and nasturtiums.

While winter's cold freezes the ardour of bird and beast alike, the larger variety of some species like vultures and kites are roused by it. By mid-January pairs of kites and vultures can be seen mating on branches of leafless *semul* (silk cotton) trees and can be heard emitting excruciating screams of pain and pleasure. Big trees like the *semul* and the *maharukh* (*Ailanthus excelsa*) are preferred by these birds both for copulation and nest-building. Smaller birds like crows, pigeons and sparrows begin their search for mates. Cock sparrows squabble among themselves while their hens barely take notice of them. Tom-cats are also in a quarrelsome mood. One afternoon two of my marmalade males went fiercely for each other and almost tore each other to pieces. Their ladies were so frightened by the sight that some defecated before they could run away and hide themselves. The tom-cats' minds were more on food than on sex. They eyed male sparrows battling beak and claw and, as the birds tumbled down with their legs entangled, the cats pounced on them. A strange phenomenon: I have never seen cats fight over a saucer of milk but tempt them with left-overs of meat or fish and they go for it and each other like hungry tigers.

For years a redstart (perhaps more than one) had been spending its winter months in my little patch of garden. It was a friendly little bird, twitching its tail after every hop as it moved closer to my chair on the veranda. Also somewhat foolish in equating me with my cats. One evening I saw a few scarlet feathers on the lawn and realised that my cats had brought the redstart to bid me farewell forever.



▼ Phlox

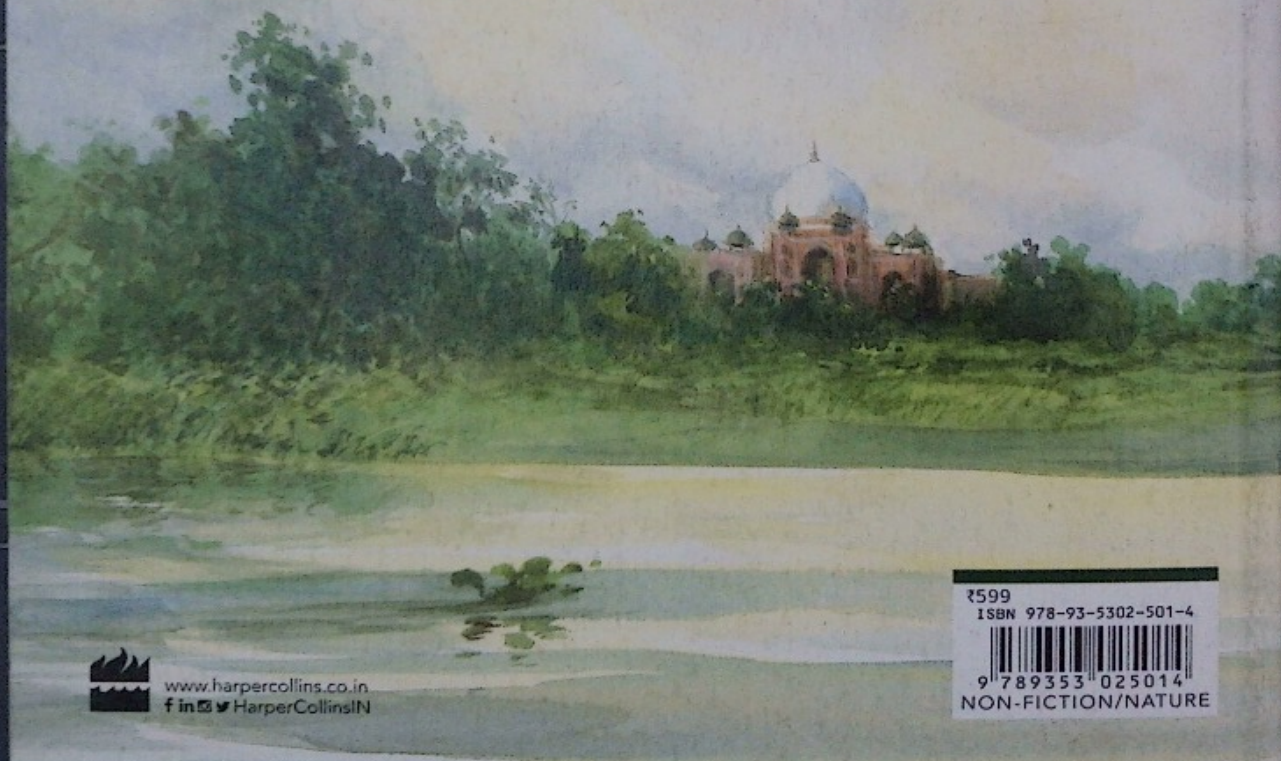
▼ Nasturtium



'[The] book is specially relevant because in the mindless rush of modern-day living, the months have begun taking on different connotations ... What breathes life into the book ... are the inspiring illustrations by Suddhasattwa Basu ... [His] diary of nature ... is a revealing experience.' INDIA TODAY

This is the diary of a nature lover, patterned after the traditional Baramasi of Indian poets. It tells us of the trees, flowers, fruits, birds, snakes, insects and animals that are found in Delhi and its surroundings through the twelve months of the year. It also mentions the many fairs and festivals that are celebrated in the country; the story of clouds and what their shapes and movements mean; why hailstorms come in spring and early summer and not in winter; how birds communicate with each other and why their calls vary with the seasons. Woven into the text are poems by Kalidasa, Guru Nanak, Meer Taqi Meer, Mirza Ghalib, Akbar Allahabadi, Rabindranath Tagore, Rudyard Kipling and many others.

Delhi through the Seasons marks Khushwant Singh's classic collaboration with Suddhasattwa Basu, one of India's finest painters of natural phenomena. This collector's edition is a rare treasure.



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