

# BOOK REVIEW

## FINDING MY SELF

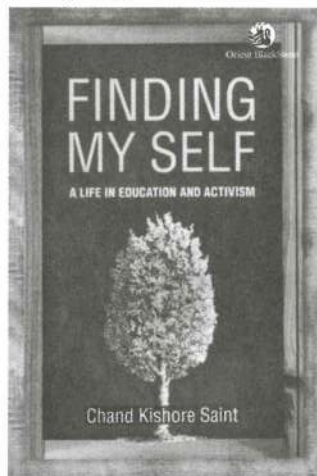
A Life in Education and Activism

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The idea of India has in recent years become a contested space, reminding many of the peril in taking for granted the legacy of a liberal, secular India. *Finding My Self* recalls a time when India's 'tryst with destiny' mobilised a new nation to move out of its tragic Partition into an era of hope, healing and creativity. Kishore Saint—educator, environmentalist, institution-builder and thinker—has left behind a book of memories that is not just about his idea of India but even more about that idea lived out as a life dedicated to India's service and to the possibility that uniquely Indian solutions to issues of want and oppression might offer alternatives significant across the world. On these pages is a life constantly testing itself against the truth and experience Kishore found around him as well as the wisdom he sought from every available resource to answer his question: 'Who am I, really?' In a life that embraced life and learning on four continents, he was soon aware of the power of compassion for both survival and service when 'no man is an island'. Caught in the tides of

**FINDING MY SELF: A LIFE IN EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM**

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migration that followed India's Partition, Kishore Saint's family moved to Kenya where he was raised and where his career began in the service of a colonial authority. A scholarship to the UK for higher education then opened Kishore's horizon to the range of political, economic and intellectual upheaval of a post-War era. Encounters at home with injustice and racism were tempered with new thoughts that opened new possibilities, tested again when Kishore moved as an educator into the ferment of America in the 1960s. Throughout these years the call of India was sounding in his mind like a tanpura, bringing him and his young family to Sewa Mandir in Udaipur in 1972. Under the leadership of educator Dr Mohan Sinha Mehta, Sewa Mandir's innovations in education and rural transformation were an early beacon in post-Independence experiments with alternative paradigms for growth and change. Udaipur and its environs became Kishore Saint's *karmabhoomi*, engaging him for most of his career, and leading him after Sewa Mandir to founding the Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (UVM) that would become a catalyst for reviving a barren landscape as well as the aspirations and capacities of those who lived there. Through UVM, Kishore offered experience and hope to many others working with communities at the margins of Indian society. It was here that Kishore Saint scaled his efforts at community mobilisation toward delivering the promises of that early trust. Rebuilding a degraded environment and encouraging a community in poverty to discover its own potential for identity, confidence and change were stepping stones toward institutions and leaders capable of transforming 'a parochial, faction- and caste-ridden situation with undercurrents of both fascination and resentment toward outsiders'.

This book reveals why outsider Kishore is today remembered for finding his own middle path between theory and practice, for his way of raising the right questions and for moving into action rather than remaining 'paralysed by too much thinking'. Action would take Kishore Saint to every corner of the country and across the world. *Finding My Self* records not just the self-discovery of an individual but an era in which history was being written by new nations and new leaders, many inspired as Kishore had been by a freedom struggle led by Gandhi and Nehru. Like them, self-discovery would come by losing himself

in service of those most in need. What shines through this narrative is the humility and modesty with which Kishore Saint looks back on a life so rich with service to, and understanding of, others. Ruthless with himself as well as his interlocutors, Kishore invariably gives credit to those who lifted his vision, while never nursing a grudge against others who so often obstructed his path. While sufferings were many, this book touches on them lightly. The focus instead is on learning derived across continents and applied in one of India's most challenging environments. For this Kishore expresses a particular indebtedness to Kenya and to England 'where I grew from an unruly, willful adolescent... from a parochial Punjabi migrant to an aspiring internationalist with a vision of global peace and harmony that would be realized through service to India, my motherland...'

Kishore had an early understanding of conflict between prevailing agendas of 'development' and 'ecology'. The book recalls the Gandhi-Nehru conversations on India's economic path, and it is here that the Gandhi in Kishore emerges with power. Every intervention is measured against value-driven benchmarks. In this, Kishore helped many (including this writer) to better understand challenges to the planet before embarking on apparent 'solutions'. He urged introspection that could evaluate every strategy by its impact on the last person and comprehend the cutting-edge relevance of the Mahatma's moral compass. Kishore's contributions to building others are left between the lines, yet it is these that give the book relevance as a resource for strength and hope in times which may seem to have little patience with the values that motivated Kishore Saint and gave him influence well beyond the memories he has left for reading.

My first meeting with Kishore Saint and his wife Sudesh was when they arrived at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad to enroll their daughter Amita. NID was then a fledgling, battling an Indian legacy of tunnel-vision schooling in its struggle to bring the profession of industrial design to the country through a pedagogy of learning by doing. As an experiment in post-War design education, this was a first of its kind. Like Kishore's own efforts in Udaipur, NID faced misunderstanding, inadequate resources and risks of rejection

at every turn. For most parents at the time, sending a child to NID appeared foolhardy, devoid of career assurance. For Kishore and Sudesh, both unorthodox educators, the guarantee was of real learning for Amita. The family shared NID's excitement of breaking new ground, and of linking an experiment in education to a new India's ability to draw confidently upon the world and to build ways of movement that could be both Indian and global in relevance. Soon Kishore was encouraging the NID community to recognise what symptoms of rapidly degrading environments and widening disparity might mean for those committed to designing India's future.

His was an early call for re-defining progress in terms of justice and sustainability, echoed in the late 1970s when the United Nations came to the NID campus for its first global conference on design for development. Kishore responded to its call for an end to cycles of waste and want by mentoring efforts to turn design education into a force for responsible service, away from the siren calls of consumerism masquerading as globalisation. He was there again as NID moved into the Technology Missions set up by a young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to bring transformational change in key sectors including drinking water, sanitation and livelihood. With Rajasthan at the centre of many activities, Kishore offered his experience and space as a testing ground. Later, Kishore and I would take this learning into an extraordinary effort across Asia, Africa and Latin America led by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It attempted to reveal perceptions of progress within communities located far away from the high tables of scientists and planners, and to measure progress in ways that went beyond statistics into the elements of human well-being. Preceding the UN's human development indicators, Kishore's compassionate understanding of how societies function and transform was a huge advantage to a small team tackling issues gigantic in nature as well as complexity. Kishore's genius was his ability to make villages around Udaipur and elsewhere into microcosms of the world.

Reading this wonderfully honest memory of a life that spanned continents and years of tumult, I was reminded of a poem which Kishore sent to me on an impulse over 20 years ago.

I like to imagine that he had these opening lines in mind when he set out to record the remarkable journey of *Finding My Self*:

All men must answer in their lives  
Those questions whose answers are enormous  
Because when one man decides how he lives  
He changes all men's lives.

