

Review

Pool of Life: The Autobiography of a Punjabi Agony Aunt, by Kailash Puri and Eleanor Nesbitt. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013. xix + 187 pp. £19.95. ISBN 978-1-84519-602-8 (paperback).

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This is an unusual and important book. Being primarily the autobiography of a relatively unknown woman, this book is in danger of sliding quietly into obscurity. However, the life story of Kailash Puri (b. 1926) touches on many important themes for the study of South Asian beliefs, both within India and in diasporic communities.

The autobiography is the product of collaboration between Kailash Puri and the respected scholar of Sikhism, Eleanor Nesbitt. In the introduction Nesbitt describes that the narrative is Kailash's own, but that she sought Nesbitt's help with the flow of her English prose. The collaborative element also influenced Kailash to describe her experience of issues of more general social interest, for example, her experience of Partition and returning to see her childhood home (now in Pakistan) in 1983.

The autobiography is helpfully and comprehensively framed by co-author Eleanor Nesbitt. In her introduction, Nesbitt places the autobiography within a context of relevant literature involving Sikh and Punjabi emigrant communities. There is a helpful glossary to common Hindi and Punjabi terms that are scattered throughout the book. The book concludes with suggestions for further reading on the themes the narrative touches upon, for example Sikh studies and the literature relating to South Asian immigrants in Britain, as well as Kailash's publications in Punjabi. There is also a very helpful index, useful for research interested more in the themes rather than the life story itself. Nesbitt's afterword provides an overview of the changes experienced by the increasingly established Punjabi Sikh communities in Britain from the 1980s to the present, with useful references for further reading.

The significance of the autobiography comes from Kailash Puri's inherently interesting life, but also from her ability to reflect upon her experience

of some of the major twentieth-century social changes in a refreshingly unaffected style. With only a basic education from rural Punjab, Kailash first came to Britain in 1946 as the wife of a young academic ecologist, Dr Gopal Singh Puri (1915–1995). The book discusses with frankness her childhood memories, the importance of food, how she understood her place as a girl in the family and her arranged marriage at age fifteen. Following wherever in the world her husband's work took the family, Kailash launched *Subhagvati*, a Punjabi women's magazine from Pune in 1956, the first of its kind in Punjabi. The young couple resided in Nigeria and Ghana during the 1960s, where Dr Puri held university positions. A new post in Liverpool brought the Puris to Britain for a second time in 1968 where they settled and made their home.

After settling in Britain, Kailash continued to write as an 'agony aunt' in Punjabi-language newspapers and magazines, giving her unique perspective onto the personal problems of a wider section of the immigrant population in a time of rapidly changing social mores. She became widely known as a 'sexologist'—someone willing to give advice about more intimate relationship problems. Kailash tirelessly advocated for women to be respected as equal partners with their husbands and active agents in their own life decisions. While not upsetting traditional gender roles within the family, she shows through both personal example and in her discussions with those who come to her for advice that relationships can be responsive to the changing needs of both partners. Kailash's strong values of strong familial connections, respectful relationships and a hopeful embracing of change echo throughout the narrative.

Kailash and Gopal Puri were teachers of yoga in 1970s Liverpool, a rare example of Indian immigrants promoting yoga at this time. Kailash's influence also reached as far as the British nation's new 'favourite dish' of chicken tikka masala, as Kailash consulted with the food company Marks & Spencer in developing tasty ready-made Indian meals for the British market.

Through Kailash's eyes the reader can understand, from a new position, changing British attitudes to immigrants, changing gender roles, women in the workplace, and other topics relevant to twentieth-century social and cultural history. Her experiences will complicate any simplistic assumptions about gender relations, women's empowerment and self-expression, and attitudes towards immigrants.

This book is a valuable primary source of autobiographical narrative helpfully coupled with a guide for further reading. It should be useful for those interested in Punjabi culture, understanding Sikhism as a living tradition, the Sikh diaspora, and twentieth-century British social history.