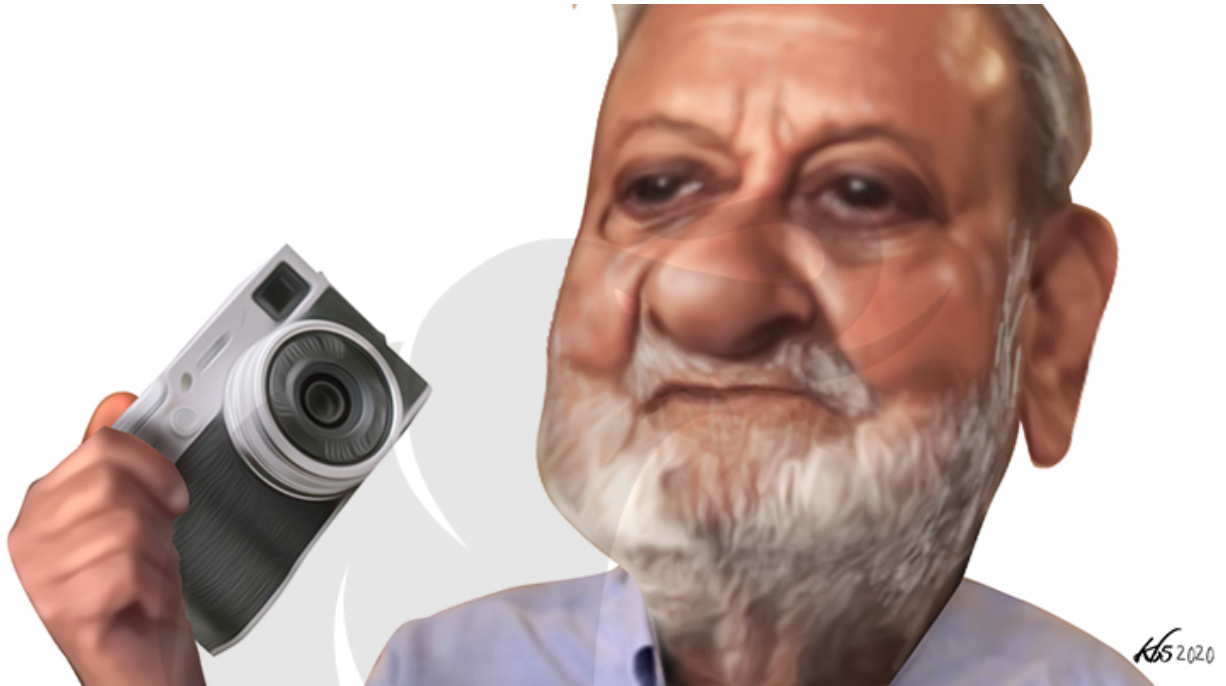




The Life and Lens of Mohinder Dhillon

By A. K. Kaiza



"You cannot write about Mohinder without first mentioning his fundamental humanity - the abiding reality that he is an all-round lovely man." — Jon Snow, presenter, Channel Four News

It was August 7th, 2008. The time would have been a little past 11 in the morning, the usual coffee, tea and cakes break hour at the literature festival in Nairobi that I was participating in. We had come out of the Braeburn School room onto the lawn for coffee, and also for the sun. And there, standing with his back to the sun, the sunlight turning his white hair into a shiny glow, was Mohinder Dhillon - ramrod straight, despite the walking stick. He carried about him the air of something profound about to happen.

The Braeburn School was on holiday and that had left it open for Kwani to hold the Kwani LitFest. A gathering of writers, guest speakers and would-be writers was holed in at the place. To an outsider, as I was, Nairobi was a little jarring. People seemed to get over-excited when talking, too shrill, too waxed. It was a society, as I later understood, that had never experienced civil war, and was struggling to find stability after the post-election violence of 2007/2008 that had shocked the nation.

Later that evening, at a drinking session with fellow writers, including Binyavanga Wainaina, Tom Maliti, Billy Kahora and Kalundi Serumaga, the Kenyan writer and journalist Parselelo Ole Kantai said, "There is this incredible fellow in my class. He has the most unbelievable story. He was a cameraman who went everywhere."

This “incredible fellow”, Kantai continued, had been to the Congo, to Vietnam. He had also almost been shot at by a firing squad in 1964. He wanted to write a book about his life.

If I did not think about the “incredible fellow” that evening, in barely a month – and for the rest of my years in Nairobi – I was to think of little else. It took me a while to appreciate that the man who I spoke with at least once a week for twelve years had been one of the pioneers of international television news. Many of the places he went with his camera had never been filmed before.

He led a unique life.

Lunch at Sir Mohinder’s

Events seemed to have moved very fast after that August. In September, I moved to Nairobi and would stay there till the end of 2011. A week later, I was asked if I would meet a certain man the syllables of whose name came in one ear and went right through the other.

We were to meet him for lunch, somewhere in Westlands. We drove up to his house, in a place I was to know as Brookside Drive, which abuts the dipping curve of Lower Kabete Road as it begins the rise to Spring Valley. The house was a bungalow set on a half-acre suburban plot. What struck me, going up the rising drive, was the garden, its gaiety of colour, the bright birds of paradise, the heliconia whose deep red seemed otherworldly, the powder puff trees, marigold aplenty, a bud or two of amaryllis, and the roses, and yet more roses.

Mohinder was waiting for us outside. I notice that he has keen eyes and that up close, he is a giant of a man. But he carries a certain humility. The smile on his face is the smile of a man not totally sure of himself.

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He leads us into his house and to the circular dining table very heavily laden for just three guests. And in what I would later learn was his child-like fascination with everything, and a party trick he doubtless liked to put on show for his guests, he reaches out and gives the table a twirl. It is one of those dining tables with a swivel top. And as the table rotates, the aroma of salad dressing, grams, and mutton permeates the air.

A fellow foodie! Where had I been all my life when Mohinder’s house was the place to be?

This septuagenarian, in this very neat and attractive house, with the beautiful, tiny figurines and artworks that you are unlikely to run into daily, was saying, relax, be yourself, start from there.

I look out of the window, and see a bird feeder outside next to a wind chime. It is not only us humans who come to lunch at Mohinder’s. And when the sunlight streams in through the corner window, you can see in the light the shades of the flowers outside that the sun picks and dashes about on the walls. Whatever this writing assignment, my heart and soul have already said yes before Mohinder has even asked if it was possible. There is something rip-roaringly alive about him.

Leaving India

Food was a constant motif in the story of Mohinder’s life as we wrote it. Of the many facets of a life

lived intensely, it was always food that came to mind as the thread running through a long, eventful life. There had been the street food in Vietnam that Mohinder described with such relish that I grew jealous of him. There was the dinner he had in Korea which he spoke about in such tones that the taste of it crept onto my tongue, as if it was just last week, rather than three decades back in 1974. There was the butter in Retla that his grandmother made. "She broke the milk," was the way he described it.

He had fond childhood recollections, from his birth in 1931 in Punjab, in a hamlet called Babar Pur, named after the first Moghul emperor, but which was previously known as Retla. There had been the kite flying. He told me to watch the movie, *The Kite Runner* (which in 2008 was all the rage), to get an idea of the value placed on this activity/sport. He had been the kite flyer, and his brother, Jindi - later a Kenyan Olympian in the 1956 Sydney event, and now a British medical doctor - had been his kite runner. There had also been the game known as *kabadi*.

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Then there was Raja, his champion fighting cock. In later years, Mohinder regretted keeping a fighting cock. But he and Raja, as is the case with pastoralists and their livestock, were soul mates. What hurt Raja hurt Mohinder even more. But Raja was not for eating. A neighbour, whose fighting cock had been decimated by Mohinder's, had lured Raja to his place and broken his leg. The inconsolable Mohinder reset Raja's bones, and fed him tumin and almonds till he got well. His grandmother complained about the extravagance on a cock. As I got to know more about her, I realised that his grandmother had shaped Mohinder's life the most.

But the cloistered life he led during his childhood, so long ago, so far away in Punjab, would never return. His father had worked for the Uganda Railways from 1917 and decided to move his family to Kenya. The 1940s world in which Mohinder came of age was totally different. It was not until Mohinder came to East Africa that he learnt that there had been a World War. He first heard of Mahatma Gandhi when he was settled in Nairobi.

He remembered setting sail for Africa with his family from Bombay (now Mumbai):

"The bustle of Bombay - the first big city I had ever seen - was overwhelming. I was afraid to cross the road. On reaching a street, I'd just stand there, transfixed. Bombay was awe-inspiring. Everything was new to me. There was almost nothing in Bombay we could relate to, except the vegetables."

In Mombasa, once the *Khandala*, a coaling ship, had deposited the family, he set out with one of his brothers, Inderjeet (later a media personality in Kenya who died in a tragic accident), and they followed, pied piper-like, men with stoves and clinking cups and the strong aroma of some strange drink that smelled like almonds. He was to discover much later, once settled in Nairobi, that it was on the streets of Mombasa that he first smelled coffee.

And so I had found the point of gravitation with Mohinder. This was not a story of woe and strife. Mohinder's life story, and the book it would birth, I could see, would best be started off as a memoir of an enchanting childhood. How else, when the best memories of Mohinder's life were those of the wide-eyed pleasure he experienced when seeing something for the first time?

When the *Khandala* drew close to the shores of Mombasa, Mohinder saw strange men in white furiously swinging sticks. They just kept swinging, as if sword-fighting, but against no one.

“David,” Mohinder tells me, his voice rising. “We knew nothing. That was my first time seeing golf being played.”

On the day they left Mombasa for Nairobi, on the train, his father, Tek Singh (fondly referred to in the home as Bau Ji) off-handedly commented on the strange, lopping bird out on the savannah. He said that one of its eggs could make an omelette for an entire family. It was the first time Mohinder had seen an ostrich.

“An omelette for the entire family? Father, what is an omelette?”

“That over there is a lion.”

“A lion?”

“Father, does a lion lay eggs?”

“The lion is the king of the jungle. It can do whatever it likes.”

Above all, Mohinder was a comedian, with perfect timing. We spent many afternoons digging up and dishing out jokes.

His first camera, when he started taking television news footage, was heavy. But he did not know it.

“It was a studio camera but I never felt the weight,” he said. “I grew up drinking buffalo milk.”

“There was one from 1979, oh, I already told the one about matooke at the Sheraton? How about fingernails?”

“Which one?”

“Oh, the ITN reporter I was with he said to me, ‘Mohinder, look how fertile Uganda is. You can put your finger in the ground and the nails grow instantly.’”

Idi Amin and the media circus

There was more than one from 1979. There was an entire world of experiences condensed into that year.

For Mohinder, 1979 was a very important year. It was, I sensed, the year when he made up his mind about many things.

The media circus. There was plenty of that. He had known Idi Amin all of the nine previous years. He had been genuinely scared of him, and even more scared of his henchmen. And so, upon the coup that felled his regime, they rushed to Makerere University where a British newspaper had reported that Amin’s soldiers had lopped off female students’ breasts.

“David, there were many terrible things Amin did,” he told me. “But the warden we approached told us, ‘Don’t make up stories about Amin. No girls had their breasts cut off.’”

For the international media, the “Third World” was fair game.

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One day, Mohinder told me that Ryszard Kapuscinski had sat down with him and told him stories about famines and huts and snakes. In the great Polish writer's books appear minute details of what Kapuscinski had encountered in his journeys across Africa - details that mirrored Mohinder's own journeys, which made one wonder whether Kapuscinski might actually have been describing Mohinder's experiences.

My real job, as it quickly became clear, was to sit and listen.

Babar Pur. India. Vietnam, Robert Mugabe, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Congo.

Talking about Mugabe brought in Nyerere, as if to clear the air. Mugabe, the most complex character Mohinder ever turned his camera lens on, back in 1979-80. A man so wily, it was thought that not even the British, who spent so much time profiling him, could not tell what he was up to.

"What about Mobutu?"

"A fop, dressing to the nines."

"And Patrice Lumumba?"

"I only met his son, a sad-faced young man, when he came to commission a bust of his father in Nairobi."

"Laurent Desire Kabila?"

"I did not make much of him. It was in the 60s. He sat there saying nothing in the presence of Somoaliot."

"Kenneth Kaunda?"

"Too emotional. The smallest thing about Zambia set him crying. The reason he kept a handkerchief constantly was so he could wipe away the tears. There was a joke in which Zambia rhymed with *some beer*. The drinking in his country made Kaunda cry too."

"Idi Amin?"

On Idi Amin, there was not a straightforward a response, except that Amin liked to clown around as a kind of diversion. When he sentenced men to be executed during Ramadhan, the Saudis got upset so Amin faked a coma. They said he was hospitalised and there was going to be an operation. It turned out to be a cyst in his backside.

Names from a bygone era, Talbot, Indira Gandhi, the Queen Mother, Emperor Haile Selassie, a portrait gallery from the dawn of the Cold War.

Food and famine

Mohinder always had stories about food, laid out as state dinners, or as history-makers.

The 20th century, a century of great famines. The food that ran out.

In 1964, when what was meant to be a few days of getting images of the Simba rebellion in Eastern Congo, turned into a two-week nightmare in what was then Albertville, now Kalemie, on the western shores of Lake Tanganyika. It was two weeks during which he met a young man named Laurent Desire Kabila who turned up with Simba rebel leader, Somialot. Locked out, and with no transport over Lake Tanganyika, they ate fish and hard, inedible French bread.

There was the dinner in Kurdistan and in Afghanistan, with hosts he never forgot who were under Soviet and Iranian attack.

There was the crisis of the El Molo whose single diet of fish had ravaged the community, which Mohinder had captured on camera decades ago.

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And above all, there was the failure of harvest, in 1984, when an entire nation, Ethiopia, had no food.

The darkening of Mohinder's vision of the world from 1984 left a shadow that hung over his head till the end of his life. Till his last months, whenever Mohinder spoke of the Ethiopian famine, he started to shake, as if he was going to go into convulsions. The image of the old man carrying a lifeless child to bury, and Mohinder, ever the witness, unable to properly carry his camera because tears are flowing down his own face. And in a charter plane doing the documentary, *African Calvary*, about the famine, Mohinder walks over to Mother Teresa and she takes his hand and consoles him, “My son, it is Calvary.” And so they name the film.

There had been the famine in Karamoja before that, in 1980. Between 1980 and 1984, the images that Mohinder captured on camera had inspired thousands of people to donate millions of dollars to buy food for famine victims.

Then there was too much of the wrong food: the matooke in Kampala in 1979 that they could no longer stomach. Kampala had been in lockdown following the Tanzanian invasion that flushed Idi Amin out of Uganda and the markets were shut. (Somehow, Mohammed Amin, a friend and rival, with whom Mohinder's name had been intertwined in the 1970s and '80s, managed to get hold of some steaks and joints.)

The decline of Empire

There was the scale of time, of history and the insurmountable bulk of an empire that lay between me and Mohinder. He was already 44 years old when I was born; when he died this year, I was 44. Life experiences too vast to comprehend, even when explained.

He had along the way been given a knighthood, which is why he was Sir Mohinder. Well into his 80s, he received an honorary Ph.D, Dr. Mohinder Dhillon.

He counted in his circle an emperor, presidents, prime ministers, Nobel laureates. He had been the personal cameraman of Emperor Haile Selassie in the waning days of his life, when the Emperor was starting to become senile.

He had been there when Belgium crashed out of the Congo. He had been there for the independence

of nearly all African countries, and there too, when the dominos continued to collapse as the structures of colonialism crumbled and gave way to newly independent states.

There he is, on 26th January 1971, a morning in Kampala. Idi Amin, likely drunk, on the morning after the coup, speech slurring, not yet fully comprehending what his coup means.

There he is as Belgian missionaries catch the last planes out of the Congo.

The last meal I had with Mohinder was a hasty breakfast on Riverside Drive, his last home, in 2019. I was in a hurry to catch a bus to Kitale. Mohinder insisted I first eat something. I gulped down a cup of coffee and snatched a banana. It had been many years since that lunch in 2008.

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By then, his health had deteriorated. He barely left the house. But the big lunches had continued. Lunchtime, I had grown to learn, had been a favourite hour to visit Mohinder, as attested by the endless stream of guests who dropped in. Peter, his long-time cook, had been one of the most popular people in Nairobi, judging by the very eminent calibre of people who dropped in on Mohinder: academics, human rights lawyers, environmentalists, international television correspondents, Hollywood film stars, activists, chief justices. And as each came in, and sat at the rotating table, there was Peter, apron on, beaming, his forever-oily face advertising the goodness coming out of the kitchen.

But I sensed too that the reason Mohinder paid attention to meals, and taking care of his guests, was to keep alive the memory of his wife, Ambi, who died during the meningitis epidemic of 1990. It was she who had trained Peter. By all accounts, she had been a woman worthy of Mohinder, and when she died, he and his son Sam lost the pillar in their lives.

He greatly loved life, but he also longed to see Ambi again.

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