**[Divided hells](https://www.dawn.com/news/1691560/divided-hells)**

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The writer was a co-host at the KSLF.

INTERNATIONAL borders emphasise insularity: Litfests are the corrective reminders of our inherent universality.

The Khushwant Singh Litfest draws, as Khushwant Singh’s mind did, from skeins of history, literature, poetry, politics and ethics. It taps the erudition of specialists, the apolitical, those whose minds can cross borders.

This year’s KSLF London had six virtual sessions on the theme ‘Crossing Borders’. Spread over May 21 and 22, it opened with a presentation of 100 objects from the history of the Indian subcontinent, selected by Richard Blurton. He spent a lifetime in the British Museum and has an unparalleled knowledge of our finest historical relics which he had helped preserve.

With tact, he deflected attempts by his moderator to label Muslims as hammer-wielding iconoclasts or to debate the ownership of the Indus Valley civilisation. History, Blurton asserted, cannot be viewed through the lens of contemporary politics.

The theme of ‘Crossing Borders’ conjures contrary images.

The second session centred around Jairam Ramesh’s latest work — Sir Edwin Arnold’s epic poem The Light of Asia, and on the life of Arnold himself. Ramesh belongs to that rare breed of Indian politicians who write not about themselves but about others — in his case, Lord Buddha. His discussion with Mick Brown (of the Daily Telegraph) demonstrated how Ramesh, a Hindu author, his Christian interlocutor, a Muslim compere, a Sikh orga­niser, a Parsi coordinator and a multi-denominational audience could join to honour Compassion, personified by Lord Buddha.

The last session had two speakers on the invasion of Ukraine — Marci Shore (an Ame­r­i­can from Yale) and Viktoras Bachmetjevas (a Lithuanian scholar). They were interviewed by Rajat Khosla (now with Amnesty International). Marci repeated the US party line — that Putin was a dictator and a despot who had to be removed for the Ukraine to become democratic. That mantra is a reprise, heard before in Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Viktoras’ thesis held fresher water: that Russia was reasserting its unburied imperial ambitions. If Mao Zedong saw himself as a modern Chinese emperor, Vladimir Putin sees himself as Czar Putin I — absolute monarchs, both suckled by a common wet-nurse: communism.

The second day (May 22) began with a discussion between the best-selling author Jeffery Archer and his cricketing buddy Mihir Bose. Archer talked about the process of writing, characters who run away with the story, his respect for Somerset Maugham, but in particular his unqualified admiration for “the master storyteller” R.K. Narayan.

It was followed by the leading US Sanskritist Wendy Doniger. Now an 82-year-old, she recalled the first year she spent in India at the age of 22 in 1963-64. She began her internship at Shantiniketan, the academy found by Rabindranath Tagore. Ecologically friendly, its classes had to be held in the open air. Therefore, no classes would be held during the monsoon months.

Doniger is the Indologist Max Müller, with spikes. Indians resent her intrusion (and mastery) of Sanskrit texts and her unorthodox approach to Hinduism. Her book The Hindus: An Alternative History (2009) angered the Hindutva brigade. It had the book withdrawn by its publisher Penguin. (It has been republished since.) Her translation of the last five books of the Mahabharata (normally ignored by scholars) describes how its heroes continue their battles, even in heaven. It is almost a parable for contemporary politics.

The subject of the last formal session was Mirza Ghalib and the joint publication by an Indian economist Amit Basole and his older Pakistani counterpart Anjum Altaf (whose articles have appeared in this paper). They were interviewed by Raza Mir, an expert on Ghalib. Mir’s command of Ghalib’s nuanced poetry put the selection of the couplets chosen by the two authors into context — Ghalib’s experience in Delhi of the 1857 uprising, his cerebral courtship with love, and his defiance of ritual orthodoxy.

KSLF 2022 ended with Rahul Singh’s conclusion. He chose to recite lines from John Lennon’s song Imagine, a message to the peoples of the world — pop philosophy set to music.

The theme of KSLF 2022 — ‘Crossing Borders’ — conjures contrary images. To Ukrainians, the phrase has one meaning, to the Russians another; to the European Union one thing, to a post-Brexit Great Britain another; to Sweden and Finland one thing, to Moscow and Beijing another; to India and Pakistan one thing, to Kashmiris another.

I had been asked by Rahul Singh and Niloufer Billimoria to open KSLF 2022. I did so with a poem I had written in 2018. I believe it reflected Khushwant’s desire for harmony and reciprocal responsibility: “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 a divided hell?”

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