

## [BOOK REVIEW](#)

# ‘Finding My Self’: Activist Chand Kishore Saint’s memoir is an experiment with truth in practice

In Saint’s humble, understated, interrogatory style, his memoir traces the ideas and ideals that shaped his life.

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Chand Kishore Saint.

The Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) sector has its share of personalities with inflated egos, petty turf battles, competing ideologies, hierarchies, clashing notions of development, and contradictions between beliefs and practice. I was fortunate to have had Kishore Saint as a mentor during my brief stint at Seva Mandir, Udaipur in 1977/78. He had recently returned from working at Friends World College in the US and was cutting his teeth at rural development work in Seva Mandir. He was intense, committed, and passionate about community self-determination and radical forms of education for community empowerment.

His book, [\*Finding My Self: A Life in Education and Activism\*](#), has just been published. I was blessed to have met Kishore and his wife, Sudesh, in 2019. Though he was frail his eyes still blazed with the intensity that I knew so well. He was deeply immersed in learning and sharing his understanding of Gandhi's teachings that Kishore had been influenced by throughout his life. He died last year, ten years into writing his memoirs. Like everything he did, this was also done with a purpose – “as a means to self-understanding, self-recovery, and self-correction.” In his humble, understated, interrogatory style, his memoir traces the ideas and ideals that shaped his life from the time he left the Punjab as a refugee to his life in Kenya through 40 years of being an educator and activist in India.

### **Education and activism**

There were distinctive experiences that led Kishore to return to India and commit himself to a life of activism. There were his experiences as a child in the Punjab made him deeply attached to the Indian soil. His years as an adolescent and young man in Kenya, “as an Asian civil servant with its segregated, three-tiered pyramid system,” “with its restricted freedoms, racially defined Citizenship, and social restraints,” made him value dignity and equality for all. His study of education in the UK and his working years in Kenya as an educator made him “a professional with a sense of vocation, from a parochial Punjabi immigrant to an inspiring internationalist with a vision of global peace and harmony that would be realised through service to India, my motherland.”

This commitment to explore, experiment, and innovate in education was cemented in his four years in the US as a teacher and leader at Friend's World College. There he “found a community of kindred spirits seeking meaning, purpose, and a way forward through education in a world gone astray in its mindless pursuit of power and self.” In these years Kishore was steeped in the ideas of Henry Thoreau, Herman Hesse and the philosophy and work of Ivan Illich at the Centro Intercultural de Documentacion (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico whose work and teachings on self-directed education in fluid and informal arrangements inspired him.

It took several years, after his return to India in 1972, for Kishore to find his true calling – to put his ideals of self-help and voluntary work into practice. His exposure to the distress among the Bhil community living in the Aravalli hills of Western Rajasthan, and the cutting down of their forests to survive gave him a deep appreciation of the importance of conservation with community needs as the driver of such conservation initiatives. During my time at Udaipur, I was able to visit Dhar, which later became an important site

of Kishore's work, where he set out to build an organic relationship with tribal communities to preserve their land and culture. Kishore set up Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (UVM 1983-2010) and a team of locals to establish a direct relationship with communities in crisis.

### **Shaping the future**

While working intensively as a leader in UVM, Kishore also served as the Director of the Ashoka Foundation in India (1984-1989). The Ashoka Foundation was founded in the USA by William Drayton to support international entrepreneurs in public service, who were termed "Innovators for the Public." In this capacity, Kishore travelled extensively to see the work of promising candidates to see their work in the field. He also participated in many important social movements including the Narmada Bachao Andolan and was an ally to Medha Patkar.

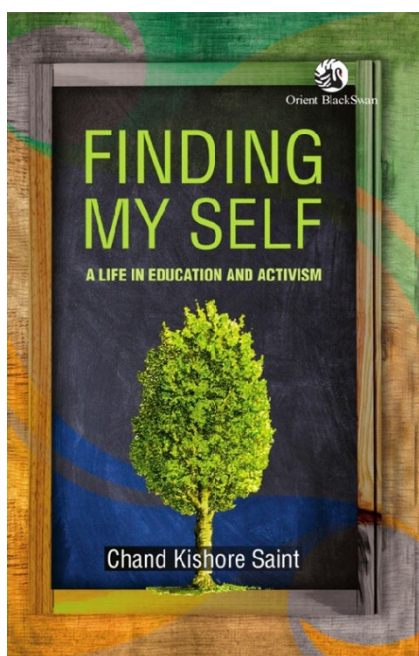
Kishore engaged with Lokayan where he immersed himself in key intellectual debates. He admired Dr Brahmdev Sharma, a legendary figure for upholding the cause of tribal and scheduled caste welfare. Sharma was one of the key figures in drafting the Panchayati Raj to Scheduled Areas (PESA) whereby the concept of *gram swaraj* or village republics for tribal areas became the ultimate authority in deciding the affairs and development in the village.

PESA also allowed for the village entity to be defined by the community instead of the revenue department. The Act has provisions for community rights and community resources apart from the individual family holdings. UVM spread the message of PESA and a few villages declared themselves as *Gram Swaraj Villages*. "This was essentially an expression of their intention to become self-existent and self-defined communities with inalienable rights and responsibilities for the care and management of their common land, water, forest and wildlife, and livestock within the village boundaries.

While deeply engaged in several layers of environmental activism that gripped India in the 1980s, Kishore remained an internationalist and continued his work with educational institutions addressing themes of development, environment, and justice through the 1990s and beyond. He became a member of the Advisory Committee for Oxfam, Great Britain in India and played a role in the Indianisation of Oxfam to help the emergence of Oxfam, India. He continued, with his

generous spirit, as he had mentored me, to mentor young people who wanted to give back to society. “My role was mainly to listen to them and to understand their motivation and commitment. I shared my experience and what had led me to engage in public life and the voluntary sector.”

Kishore was deeply engaged and committed to social change always keeping in mind the importance of self-determination, freedom, and dignity. His moral courage and his own “experiments with the truth in practice,” made his life professionally and personally tumultuous but he held steadfast to his ideals. Till the very end, he was politically, intellectually, and socially engaged in the work of creating a stronger, more democratic, and just India from the village up.



***Finding My Self: A Life in Education and Activism, Chand Kishore Saint, Orient Black Swan.***