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Abstract

Gives biographical background on the early 20th century evangelist Sundar Singh. Speculates that Singh, well-known in Lewis's time, is the model for the Sura mentioned in *That Hideous Strength*.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—The Sura—Sources; Singh, Sundar—Biography; Singh, Sundar—Influence on C.S. Lewis

Golden Chains of Coincidence

A C.S. Lewis Puzzle Solved and Mystery to Ponder

Kathryn Lindscoog

Fame is fickle. It is easy to name a great Early-Twentieth-Century evangelist who drew immense crowds, who had amazing physical stamina, and whose name begins with the letters S-U-N-D-A-A . . . There were two of them – Billy Sunday and Sundar Singh.

Over fifty years after their deaths, Billy Sunday is widely remembered and Sundar Singh is widely forgotten. But for ten years Sundar Singh was an international phenomenon. The first of several books about him came out when he was only 27 years old. In 1920 he preached his way from New York to Honolulu, and crowds thronged to him in many countries. He was a legend in his time, to say the least – the Mother Teresa of his day.

Twenty years after his early death, Sundar Singh was still warmly remembered. Queen Wilhelmina of Holland wrote in a letter on October 24, 1949, "I never met him. I know him only from his books and books about him. I belong to those who are deeply impressed by his life and teaching and I am sure the way he manifested his radiant love for Christ and His peace, and in general his teaching, was a real help to me in the worst episodes of the terrible catastrophe that was the last war."¹

Surely four of the most gifted evangelists in our century have been Billy Sunday, Sundar Singh, C.S. Lewis, and Billy Graham. They vary greatly. Although no two are alike, it seems obvious that Billy Graham was somewhat influenced by the example of his predecessor Billy Sunday. But until now no one has considered the likelihood that C.S. Lewis was influenced by his predecessor Sundar Singh. I think that Sundar Singh is a missing key to the spiritual life of C.S. Lewis and the missing key in his trilogy.

An Extraordinary Child

Sundar Singh was born nine years before C.S. Lewis, in 1889. He was the youngest child in a wealthy, aristocratic Sikh family (all Sikhs are named Singh) in the village of Pampur in Patiala. The Sikh faith combines Hinduism and Islam, and so his godly mother lovingly taught him the Sikh and Hindu scriptures and urged him to become a holy sadhu. When he was seven years old he knew the entire Bhagavadgita by heart (not a unique feat in India); and as his mother had hoped, he was filled with longing for *santi*, peace of soul.

When Sundar Singh was fourteen years old, in 1902, his mother and older brother died. (In 1904, C.S. Lewis' mother, uncle, and grandfather died.) The loss devastated him. Unlike his mother, his father thought that Sundar

Singh was overly religious for his age, and, indeed, by Western standards he was. As a boy, he eagerly studied holy books, meditated, practiced Yoga, and did good works. Once his Guru said to his father, "Your son will become either a fool or a great man." He seems to have been a spiritual prodigy; and his sister, who remained a Sikh all her life, was God-centered also.²

Sundar Singh had been seeking God in all Indian religions: Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. But he refused to seek God in Christianity, which seemed Western. He was exposed to Christianity because for a year he attended a local school provided by American Presbyterian missionaries. His mother had met some of these Christians before she died and had been friendly to them. But the more he heard of the New Testament, the more he resented it. He quit the school. When he saw missionaries in public he shouted and threw stones and filth at them and ordered his father's servants to do the same. He led his friends along also. He finally burned a New Testament in public to express his outrage.

Later, Sundar Singh saw that his fanatical opposition to Christianity had been caused by his loyalty to Hinduism combined with a secret attraction to Christianity. He believed that Christianity was false, and so he wanted to annihilate it. His father disapproved of Sundar Singh's Bible-burning as much as his obsession with proper Indian religions and wondered if his son was losing his sanity. Indeed, on December 17, 1904, fifteen-year-old Sundar Singh told his father good-bye and announced that he would commit suicide before breakfast. He fully planned to lie down on the railroad tracks near his house and be run over by the 4 a.m. express train. He felt he could not endure life without God any longer; he hoped to find God on the other side of death. (Heiler, p. 35.)

At 3 a.m. on December 18, Sundar Singh arose from bed and took a cold bath according to Hindu custom. He begged and begged God to reveal himself before the train came. Finally a great light appeared in his small room, and he looked around to make sure the house was not on fire. Then a luminous cloud appeared, and he saw a Man's face in it – radiant with love. The man spoke in perfect Hindustani, Sundar Singh's mother-tongue. "Why do you persecute me? Remember that I gave My life for you upon the Cross." (Heiler, p. 36)

Sundar Singh fell down before Jesus and worshipped him. Peace and joy finally flooded his soul. He had found God at last. At breakfast he told his bewildered father he had, in a sense, killed himself: "The old Sundar Singh is

dead; I am a new being."³ His conversion was obviously much like that of the Apostle Paul, and he told everyone who would listen.

Sundar Singh's Christianity was even less acceptable to his father than the previous enmity to Christianity. He thought that his son had gone completely mad. Sundar Singh was convinced that if his mother had lived longer, she too would have become a Christian. But the rest of his relatives pressured him relentlessly to abandon his new faith. He was finally forced to eat and sleep outside the home, and then driven away. It is said that his last meal at home was poisoned and that he almost died from it. His friend Gardit Singh, who became a Christian at the same time, died from poisoned food. In the local uproar, the mission station had to be closed down and village Christians moved away for safety.

Sundar Singh went to live quietly at a medical mission station where he studied the Bible and prepared himself for baptism, which was against the law for him until he turned sixteen. On his sixteenth birthday, on Sunday, September 3, 1905, he was baptized an Anglican Christian. (Heiler, p. 57) Because he was obviously called to be an evangelist, his missionary teacher advised him to get theological training. But he felt called to go out and preach the Gospel as a traditional Indian holy man instead.

A Wandering Evangelist

Thirty-three days after his baptism, Sundar Singh put on the yellow linen robe of a celibate Sadhu and set out with only a Hindustani New Testament and a blanket which he often wrapped around his head as a turban. (Heiler, p. 56) He used no money, and he never begged; he accepted food and shelter gratefully when they were offered to him, and when they were not offered he did without. He also did without the protective dagger that Sikh men always carry, and so he had no protection from wild animals or violent men. He walked barefoot; when someone asked him once if stones did not cut his feet, he answered that his feet were so hard they cut the stones.⁴

The Sikhs are noted for their outstanding physiques. As a typical Sikh, Sundar Singh was just over six feet tall, with a full beard and luminous dark eyes. His eyes showed deep inner peace and drew people to him. He stood erect, his body poised. Animals and children were always attracted to him. He loved to play with children, and he had a sense of humor. (Andrews, pp. 183-86) His features were refined, and when Jesus was mentioned, his whole face lit up with a joyful radiance.⁵ After his vision of Jesus on December 18, 1904, he had just one passionate interest—loving and serving Jesus.

Thus he wandered around India and to Afghanistan and Kashmir preaching Christ. He joined Samuel Stokes, an American missionary who had left his wealthy family in order to try to live like St. Francis of Assisi in India; together to two friends worked in a leper colony and then in the Plague Hospital in Lahore.

In more ways than one, Sundar Singh resembled today's beloved Mother Teresa. Today's Westerners can probably understand his ministry best by looking at her ministry.

In 1909 Sundar Singh took the advice of friends and became a theology student at St. John's Divinity College in Lahore. In 1910 he received an Anglican preaching license. But as an Anglican preacher he would not be allowed to preach any time and everywhere; Anglican preachers were somewhat restricted by their own regimentation. Sundar Singh felt led to return his license and to keep his ministry as broad as the world. He remained an Anglican all his life and preached often in Anglican churches, but as a preacher he refused to be bound to one denomination. (Heiler, p. 54) To him all Christianity was one.

Furthermore, Sundar Singh never turned against the religions that had nurtured him as a child. He respected them for their wisdom and saw them fulfilled in Christ. He believed ardently in giving people the living water of God in the cup of their own culture, not in a foreign cup. He felt a special calling to preach to the dangerous, inaccessible land of Tibet, and he made many almost impossible trips there on foot.

In 1912 Sundar Singh's fame began to spread across India and in 1916 the first of several books about him was published. (Heiler, p. 66) Wherever he went in India, both Christians and non-Christians thronged to see and hear him. In 1918 he also preached in Ceylon, Burma, Singapore, Japan and China. In Penang, Malaysia, he was invited to preach the message of Jesus in a Sikh temple. In 1919 Sundar Singh's father received him kindly and said he was ready to become a Christian. (Heiler, p. 72) They were reconciled at the very time when C.S. Lewis and his father became estranged after World War I.⁶ At this time C.S. Lewis was a student at Oxford.

The Two Paths Cross

Sundar Singh was told by God to preach in England, and his father offered to pay for the journey. In February, 1920, he arrived in England (where his friends finally succeeded in getting him to use sandals and a shawl out of consideration of his hosts) (Andrews, p. 70), and he first stayed at a Quaker center. Then he was a guest of the Anglican Cowley Fathers in Oxford and preached in several colleges and St. John's Church there. (Heiler, p. 73)

It is highly likely that C.S. Lewis heard that Sundar Singh was speaking in Oxford at the time, and it is easy to imagine their passing in the street and seeing each other. But it is unlikely that Lewis went to hear the Sadhu speak. In the first place, Lewis was especially busy with his studies that month. He wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves, "I must work like ten devils this term." (Lewis, *They Stand Together*, p. 264)

Furthermore, Lewis found Christianity distasteful. And, to top it off, he had an upsetting experience early in

February after a night talk with a student friend about "shadowy subjects - ghosts and spirits and Gods." His friend told me about many supernatural experiences, and to Lewis they became incredibly real. He felt almost hypnotized by his friend's accounts, and fell into a fit of terror like nightmarish terrors he had suffered in childhood. As a result, he said, he "conceived, for the present, a violent distaste for mysteries and all that kind of business." (Lewis, *They Stand Together*, p. 263)

Ironically, years later Lewis became friendly with Sundar Singh's hosts the Cowley Fathers, and he eventually took one of them to be his spiritual director to personally pastor and counsel him.

From Oxford the Sadhu went to London, where he preached to great crowds in a variety of major churches, including the Baptist Metropolitan Tabernacle. At Church House, Westminster, he addressed a meeting of 700 Anglican clergymen, including several bishops and the Archbishop of Canterbury. He also spoke at Trinity College, Cambridge, and crossed to Paris to preach. Then he went to Ireland and on to Scotland, where he preached in leading Presbyterian churches in Glasgow and Edinburgh. (Andrews, p. 85-89)

In May the Sadhu crossed the Atlantic and spent three months preaching in cities from New York to San Francisco. Next he preached in Honolulu, then in several places in Australia. In contrast to other travelling speakers from India in those days, Sundar Singh did not seek to explain and praise Indian wisdom; he came to preach only Jesus. (Heiler, pp. 78-79) Finally, at the end of September, he returned to India, grieved about the greedy materialism he had seen in the West. In the East many people worship idols, he observed, but in the West it is even worse; in the West people worship themselves. (Heiler, p. 81)

In 1921 Sundar Singh ministered in Tibet again. Then in early 1922 an old dream of his came true; he toured Palestine, tracing the steps of Jesus. From there he went to preach in Egypt; then in France; and then in Switzerland, where he spoke in the hall used by the League of Nations. In Germany he spoke in Martin Luther's own church in Wittenberg. Then he spoke in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Holland. He arrived back in England too tired to preach, and spoke only at the Keswick conference in Wales to keep a promise. That year he turned down pressing invitations to speak in Finland, Russia, Greece, Rumania, Serbia, Italy, Portugal, the United States, and New Zealand. (Heiler, p. 77)

The End of the Path

In spite of the fame and adulation heaped upon him, Sundar Singh reportedly remained as unassuming and humble as Mother Teresa. He said he came not to preach (the world had plenty of sermons), but to witness to the saving power of Jesus. (Heiler, p. 83) His one interest was to come nearer and nearer to Jesus, to grow more and more like him, and to wear out in his service. Indeed, people

everywhere were struck by what they perceived as his resemblance to Jesus. To some he seemed to *be* Jesus. (Heiler, pp. 9-10)

Some people were interested in the Sadhu chiefly because of the miracles and marvels in his life and his frequent ecstasies and visions. When he realized this, he quit telling so much about that part of his life. What he wanted to emphasize most was prayer. He attributed all he knew and did and experienced to prayer. (Appasamy, pp. 162-163) "Prayer, prayer, and again prayer" was his motto. (Heiler, p. 88)

When Sundar Singh's father died in 1923, he left his son an old house to use as a home base because Sundar Singh's health was declining. There he spent much time reading, writing, and praying.

In April, 1929, he set off on his dangerous trek to Tibet again in spite of severe heart trouble and blindness in one eye. He was only 39 years old, but the physical harshness of his life aged him greatly. He had risked death many times on his journeys to Tibet, but this time it would have taken a miracle for him to get there alive. Apparently that miracle did not happen. After he set off, no one ever heard from him again. Although friends went searching for information about him, no clues were ever found. He had simply disappeared.

Many people found it hard to believe that Sundar Singh could have died, even when the government of India announced four years later that he was officially given up for dead.⁶ Some suspected that he had withdrawn from civilization in order to meditate and pray in the Himalayas. But it is most likely that he died shortly after he set out on his final missionary journey. For years he had been eager to leave this life in order to get to heaven to be more fully with God.

It was almost surely in April or May, 1929, that Sundar Singh ended his Christian vocation on this earth. And, oddly enough, that is exactly when C.S. Lewis knelt down in his room in Oxford and reluctantly admitted that God is God and began his own journey in Christian ministry.⁷

Sundar Singh in C.S. Lewis Books

In C.S. Lewis' 1931 account of his conversion to Christianity, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he told of a Man who came to help him when he was in great need.

"Then I dreamed that once more a Man came to him in the darkness." The Man said, "Your life has been saved all this day by crying out to something which you call by many names..." (Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, pp. 145-146) I am convinced that Lewis was consciously echoing Sundar Singh's account of his conversion when he wrote this allegorical passage about his own conversion to Christ. *The Pilgrim's Regress* is made up largely of intentional quotations and reflections of a wide variety of other authors, and it fits the pattern of the entire book for Lewis to refer to

someone else's famous conversion experience when telling of his own.

I think it possible that some of Lewis' other ideas are influenced by the life and teachings of Sundar Singh. For example, the name Singh reportedly comes from the Sanskrit word for lion. Because Sundar Singh was popularly perceived as the most Christlike man in Lewis' day, it is possible that Sundar Singh was in the back of Lewis' mind when Aslan the lion bounded into Lewis' first story of Narnia.

I have noticed that these two men expressed the same idea about the relationship between wishes and truth. Sundar Singh once wrote:

Agnostics neither believe in the existence of God, nor do they disbelieve. They say we neither know, nor can we know. But this is a mistake, for every desire that we have is given for a special purpose, and we should have had in us no desire to believe in God, unless he truly exists. Who can meet that desire.

As if he had absorbed that idea and made it his own, C.S. Lewis wrote:

But what does the existence of the wish suggest? At one time I was much impressed by Arnold's line "Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread." But surely, tho' it doesn't prove that one particular man will get food, it does prove that there is such a thing as food! i.e. if we were a species that didn't normally eat, weren't designed to eat, would we feel hungry?

If it is true that C.S. Lewis was influenced by Sundar Singh, the single most important possibility of influence is the remarkable devotion to prayer that both men practised. Prayer seemed to be easy for Sundar Singh and difficult for Lewis. Yet Lewis also was noted for devotion in prayer.

Whether or not C.S. Lewis was influenced by Sundar Singh in his prayer life and when he wrote *The Pilgrim's Regress*, as I suspect, I am positive that Lewis was influenced by Sundar Singh when he wrote his third science-fiction novel, *That Hideous Strength*.

In his first two science-fiction novels, C.S. Lewis recounted adventures of his hero Elwin Ransom on Mars and Venus. In the third of the series, *That Hideous Strength*, Ransom has changed his name to Mr. Fisher-King and is involved in an adventure in England. He has taken on a strange assignment that came to him indirectly from a man in India.

"...the great native Christian mystic whom you may have heard of - the sura," Arthur Deniston explained to Jane Studdock in chapter five of the novel.¹¹ The Sura foresaw a great danger to the human race coming to a head in England, and he left prophetic word that a group of committed people would gather around Ransom to combat the evil. After giving this message, the Sura disappeared, and no one knew if he was alive or dead.

Today most readers assume that the Sura was a brief and eccentric flight of fancy on Lewis' part and that there was no real native Christian mystic in India who was widely known in England and who had disappeared. But as a completely imaginary, undeveloped saint *ex-machina*, the Sura could be considered an aesthetic error on Lewis' part. His intrusion into the trilogy is disturbing because not enough is said to make him credible. He seems an anomaly, a hint or reference to a story Lewis hasn't told us.

Because of this, it has seemed to some alert readers either that Lewis intended to reveal more about the Sura and failed to follow through, or else that he expected readers to be familiar with such a figure. So it was that a reader of *CSL*, the bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society, asked in the May, 1979, issue, "Was the 'Sura' a real person, or was he just part of the story?"

In the July issue, a helpful reader responded that the Sura is probably "just part of the story," not any historical figure. I disagree. I believe that the fictitious Sura is the real Sadhu.

In Sanskrit the word *Sura* means God. In the Hindu pantheon, a *sura* is a good angel or genie. In Arabic a *sura* is one of the 114 chapters of the Koran. Lewis must have known all this when he chose the word. Why, one wonders, did he not call his Indian mystic the Mahatma rather than the Sura? Mahatma is our familiar term of honor for an Indian sage or saint.

I believe that Lewis used the word *Sura* rather than Mahatma because he was thinly disguising his real choice, the word *sadhu*. A *sadhu* is a holy man in India. (As an adjective in Sanskrit, *sadhu* means straight.) If Lewis had said what he meant and called his mystic the Sadhu instead of the Sura, some naive readers might have been apt to take seriously his fictional use of that historical figure. I believe that Lewis meant for his readers to identify his Sura with Sundar Singh, who was called the Sadhu; but he wanted to make sure that they realized that his story in *That Hideous Strength* was, as he said, just "a modern fairy-tale for grown-ups."¹²

Lewis had no way to foresee the future generations who read *That Hideous Strength* would never have heard of the famous Sundar Singh he brought into his story. In fact, when Lewis wrote *That Hideous Strength*, Sundar Singh had been missing only fifteen years and would have been 54 years old if still alive somewhere. Lewis outlived the Sadhu by 34 years, and Lewis has been dead for more than 25 years now. To readers today, the Sadhu may seem lost in the dim past; but to C.S. Lewis he was a contemporary - a famous and important contemporary, as Mother Teresa is to us today.

Links in the Gold Chain of Prayer

To check my conviction that C.S. Lewis' Sura was really meant to represent Sadhu Sundar Singh, I contacted

Lewis' Oxford pupil and lifetime friend Dom Bede Griffiths, since 1955 a Benedictine monk in India. I explained my theory and asked him what he thought. (It happens that Griffiths, like Sundar Singh, wears a traditional robe of an Indian holy man.) Griffiths wrote to me:

As regards Sadhu Sundar Singh, I know his life well and have always admired him. Lewis would have admired him especially for his nondenominational or 'mere' Christianity. I don't recall C.S. Lewis ever mentioning him, but I think it is almost certain that the reference in *That Hideous Strength* is to him.¹³

In 1946, the year when *That Hideous Strength* was first published in the United States, an American woman destined to marry C.S. Lewis had a conversion experience rather like the one that Sundar Singh had 42 years earlier. Joy Davidman was alone at home one night during a severe family crisis, full of fear and despair. Then suddenly,

There was a Person with me in that room, directly present to my consciousness – a Person so real that all my previous life was by comparison a mere shadow play. And I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep.¹⁴

Joy later said that she was the world's most surprised atheist. She knew that instant that God was there, that He had always been there, and that He loved her. She was radically, permanently changed; and her new joy and serenity helped her though inevitable criticism and rejection from relatives and professional friends. Her life story is told in *And God Came In* by Lyle Dorsett.

It seems inevitable that when C.S. Lewis heard Joy Davidman's account of her conversion experience, it reminded him of the similar conversion experience of Sundar Singh. But all these gentle points of similarity, contact, or influence between the lives of Sundar Singh and C.S. Lewis have to be viewed in the twilight of responsible supposal because they cannot be examined in the bright light of hard data and written records.

It is a fact that in Lewis' invented plot in *That Hideous Strength*, the Sura in India passed on a spiritual assignment to Ransom in England, whom he had never met. Is it possible (I wonder) that in real life the Sadhu in India unknowingly passed a spiritual anointing on to C.S. Lewis in England? (The Bible speaks of such an event in the story of Elijah and Elisha in *II Kings 2*.)

Surely the Sadhu's prayers at the end of his life might have included prayers for God to raise up a teacher in England who would lead multitudes to Christ. Right after his death that happened. Such synchronicity would be in keeping with the Sadhu's strange and marvelous life, and perhaps with Lewis' unusual life as well. Lewis made no bones about his belief that Christians can relate to each other in spiritual ways beyond ordinary understanding. That is the Communion of Saints.

It was C.S. Lewis' favorite Christian teacher George MacDonald who believed that we don't even notice most of life's coincidences, but that they are all significant. He ventured:

And if we believe that God is everywhere, why should we not think Him present even in the coincidences that sometimes seem so strange? For if He be in the things that coincide, He must be in the coincidences of those things.¹⁵

George MacDonald died on September 18, 1905. Just then the young Sundar Singh decided to become a wandering Sadhu and in less than three weeks set out on his 24 year ministry. When Sundar Singh died in the spring of 1929, just exactly then C.S. Lewis dedicated his life to God and gradually began his own remarkable ministry. All three of these men ministered by public speaking, by writing, and by deep and constant prayer.

Prayer...

For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Notes

1. A.J. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh: A Biography* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1966) p. 7.
2. Friedrich Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh* (Abridged translation by Olive Wyon (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1970), p. 31.
3. Heiler, p. 37. Sundar Singh wrote later, "What I saw was no imagination of my own. Up to that moment I hated Jesus Christ and did not worship him. If I were talking of Buddha I might have imagined it, for I was in the habit of worshipping him. It was no dream. When you have just had a cold bath you don't dream! It was reality, the Living Christ!"
4. C.F. Andrews, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: A Personal Memoir* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934) p. 7.
5. In addition to written descriptions of Sadhu Sundar Singh, C.F. Andrews has included as the frontispiece to his book a full-length photograph of Sundar Singh standing alone at Selly Oak Colleges, a Quaker center, shortly after his first arrival in England.
6. C.S. Lewis, *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (1914-1963) (London: Collins, 1979), p. 258.
7. Andrews, "Chapter 13: Is He Dead?" pp. 202-215.
8. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 215.
9. C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 144.
10. Source temporarily misplaced. See *The Complete Works of Sadhu Sundar Singh* (Madras, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1986).
11. Letter written from C.S. Lewis to Sheldon Vanauken on December 23, 1950, and most recently reprinted in the appendix of my book *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*, p. 169.
12. C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), p. 125.
13. In his preface Lewis called *That Hideous Strength* a fairy-tale, a fantasy, and "a tall story."
14. Personal letter from Dom Bede Griffiths in Shantivanam on June 12, 1987.
15. Personal letter from Dom Bede Griffiths in Shantivanam on June 27, 1987.
16. Lyle Dorsett, *And God Came In* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. 59.
17. George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood*, as quoted by C.S. Lewis in *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 104.