

## **Kesri Singh (in Ghosh's novel *Flood of Fire*) Disillusioned**

**Character** Kesri Singh is a young man, the son of a poor farmer in north India and the brother of Deeti (the woman who brought disgrace to the family when she escape from her husband's funeral pyre and ran off with an Untouchable man, whom she later married). While unaware of his sister's whereabouts, Kesri also leaves the family home and joins the British Indian army. He takes this decision, despite his father's advice to fight for the Mughal Emperor, to defend his homeland against the British. But Kesri is not interested in politics or empire; he is interested in finding a route out of rural poverty (as did millions of Indians who served the British until 1947). He is restless but naïve, a rustic who does not understand the wider world, until he joins the army and is sent to Canton to punish the Chinese for the audacity in outlawing the opium trade. He is also proud, of his good-looks and his 'charming' personality. Gradually, though, Kesri acquires a new perspective. First, he is told that his sister married an Untouchable man, and he is declared an 'outcaste' himself by a council of fellow Indian soldiers. This revelation is made by his superior, who (somewhat unbelievably) turns out to be Deeti's dead husband's brother. Then, his experiences in Canton teach him that he is a mercenary. Kesri thus realises that, despite his desire to leave his rural village, he is controlled by the caste system and his sister's transgression. And despite his journey from isolated north India to China, he did not find freedom. He ends in disillusionment.

**Activities** Through flashbacks, we see Kesri as a child with his sister in their village, helping his father with ploughing and harvesting. However, most of the description of Kesri focuses on his life in the army, which is a rich documentation of an ordinary soldier's experience. He undergoes demanding physical training, instruction in bayonet and firearms use and in following the army code of absolute loyalty to one's unit and obeying one's superior. We watch him marching on army expeditions in India (before he is sent to Canton) and interacting with local villagers when they camp. He then spends time at Fort William in Calcutta, from where he sails with his platoon to Canton. There, he takes part in the assault, leading his men, killing with his sword and taking no prisoners.

Kesri, the farmer's son, who defied his father's wish that he should join the decaying Mughal army to enlist with the army of the new power in India, the British, helps his British masters defeat the Chinese, then **realises** that he is really a mercenary who can never experience the passion the Chinese feel as they defend their lands.

### **Illustrative moments**

*Proud* Kesri Singh is proud of his background (he is from a relatively high caste), of his appearance and of his physical strength. This is displayed in the opening scene of the novel, when he is leading his platoon through the rice fields of Assam. As an upper-caste recruit, he is an officer (Havildar) riding on horseback and leading others. 'Havildar Kesri Singh was the kind of soldier who liked to take the lead...when marching through territory already conquered and his only job was to fly the colours and put on their best parade-ground faces for the benefit of the crowds.'

*Disgraced* The proud man falls when it is discovered that his sister broke caste rules by marrying an Untouchable (who had rescued her from her husband's funeral pyre). A superior officer informs him and spits at him, saying, 'I never want to see you again.' Incredulous, Kesri nevertheless knows that he will be stripped of his status and sent to another regiment as a common soldier. Following this revelation, 'the walk from the officer's tent to his own was the longest of his life,' Ghosh tells us. 'None of the men looked at him...they knew he had been declared an outcaste...Everyone drew back, creating a space around him, as if he had become a moving source of defilement.'

*Disillusioned* Kesri's eyes are later fully opened in combat with Chinese troops, who are overwhelmed by superior British firepower. In one scene of hand-to-hand fighting, Kesri drives his sword into a Chinese soldier who refused to surrender. 'When he had pulled out his dripping sword, Kesri saw that the man's eyes were still open. For a few seconds of life that remained to him, the man fixed his gaze on Kesri. His expression was one that Kesri had seen before, on campaigns in the Arakan and the hills of eastern India – he knew it to be the look that appears on men's faces when they fight for their land, their homes, their families, their customs, everything they hold dear.'

that moment, he reflects that 'in a lifetime of soldiering he had never known what it was to fight . . . for something that tied you to your fathers and mothers.' He also realizes that 'doing his job' in the service of the East India Company makes him little different from 'hired murderers.'