

KHUSHWANT SINGH – IN WISDOM & IN JEST

Stories all his life

And life was a story of wonder and challenges

Every day of his life, Khushwant Singh spun stories from the things he saw and felt around him and had readers waiting for more. He was the witness and also the prosecution for everything that he thought, using his favourite words—‘a humbug.’

Everything was judged in a clear prism of his common sense, for common sense, at its best, is true wisdom. Nothing that was awry was accepted and it was strange that people enjoyed getting ticked off by the indomitable Sardar. They did not challenge him but they agreed with him. That is the dilemma of traditional India. The reason he was so widely read was because he told good stories, in his fiction as well as in his columns, and held the reader’s interest. The storyteller reveals the extreme possibilities of peoples’ lives and connects the reader to strange realities, so that they can make sense of their own lives. In his stories, of real and imaginary people, he had always something to give by way of the romance of unusual.

The profound and the profane

Khushwant was a man who lived and wrote amidst the spaces of the sublime and the ridiculous. Working in complete and fearless acceptance of his own nature, without pretence or hypocrisy, he wrote as he thought and always maintained, ‘I did not care a damn for what

people thought or said.' There is a unique and surprising diversity in the range of his writing. From a seminal work on the Sikh history, translations on the Sikh Scriptures and the Hindu upanishads, short stories, novels, presentations of Urdu poetry which he loved, to essays and inspirational books and finally to his much loved and also much criticised joke books, Khushwant had done it all.

'I do not stick to any one style or genre,' he once said to me in one of the many interviews we had over the course of many decades. 'I do not like to be trapped in anything. Look around you at nature. Nature has no style and no genre. Nature makes mountains and trees and rivers, snakes and insects and elephants and giraffes. Creativity should be free and must not be limited except by one's own mind and thinking.'

Khushwant wrote in the realms of the profound as well as the profane. One was derived from his tremendous humour and carefree nature. 'I am an incorrigible jester,' he used to say. More than other men, Khushwant had a secret life that was lived away from the media blast and the applause. Certainly, he loved and revelled in the applause and made no bones about it. He was a latecomer to success and was hungry for it. For the first 40 years of his life, he had wandered the labyrinths of an unsettled, often despairing life. He took up jobs and dropped them, he tried his hand at various things, he took up briefless barrister, but his real calling eluded him for the most part of his youth.

The last time we met Khushwant was after the release of his book, *The KhushwantNama*, a bit grandly titled in the style of the life histories of the Mogul emperors. It was strange that, in spite of his phenomenal success in being India's most popular and most discussed writer, someone who had written over 90 books and ran columns in nearly 50 newspapers, he still was unhappy about the fact that his last and most ambitious novel, *Delhi*, had been indifferently received. It was a historical novel, set on a magnificent scale, and written with some beautiful passages based on the poetry and the

cultural heritage of the city that he loved but, as a novel, it did not hold attention.

‘The greater the artist,’ wrote Nobel prize winning author, Ben Okri, ‘...the greater the imagination, the greater the will, and the greater the sense of secret failure.’

He was 98 years old at the time, and the success and the applause were all behind him. It was important for him to know that the writing had been good, for he was the quintessential writer, and at the end of the day what mattered were the wisdom and the truth that had come from his pen. He spoke about the new writers, such as JhumpaLahiri, AmitavGhosh, Arundhati Roy and others, praising their turn of phrase and thought content, and then said, ‘but I belong to the old school. Mulk Raj Anand, RK Narayan etc and I think I write as well as them.’

The media was quick to brand him with controversy and shock, for it is the loud and clamorous voice that sells. People who never read him, or ever would, knew him only as a jester and a columnist. He was called ‘the Indian gad fly’ as an intended compliment; and also a ‘dirty old man’, perhaps also as a compliment. In his own carefree way, Khushwant enjoyed that, because he took neither himself nor other people too seriously. Yet, as writer Shoba De has said, he was none of those things.

A palette of everything

Khushwant was a gifted and sensitive writer who depicted the irony and the passions of life with his unbridled realism. Like Hemingway, Khushwant was Spartan with his words. He wrote but with the essence of what he saw. There was a restraint born of wisdom and

understanding that life is as it is. The joy and the tragedy happen in a world of imperfect men, condemned to live unsteady passions. Indeed, if there were no imperfections in men and the lives they were given, there would be no stories. One could feel some of this on reading his book, *The Train to Pakistan*. The years before he wrote that first novel, of a struggle and a self-discovery, that a writer faces alone, are reflected in that book. He had done many things, given them up and yet almost inexorably, life had taken him somewhere.

In his late 30s, there was a time of doubt, a low point in his life. He was a rich man's son and had lived well, travelled abroad and been to the best colleges in India and England. He was married and had mostly been living off his father, Sir Sobha Singh. His wife was from a prominent family, a feeling that rankled him.

Also, by then, he had done only those works and jobs that he had hated. As a lawyer, he had seen the futility and dishonesty that he felt prevailed in the profession. Instead of burying himself in law books and briefs, he was more interested in the stories of criminals. So he socialised and took up literary pursuits, started reading whatever he could find. Since he was in Lahore and friendly with people of literary tastes, he could satisfy his lifelong love for Urdu poetry. These were the things that interested him and not the legal profession. He was quick to see through things, impatient with pomposity and outspoken by nature.

Then came a time, when the depressed and feckless middle aged Khushwant just did not know where he was going. In that state of angst and emptiness, Khushwant went to the Bangla Sahib gurdwara in Delhi one evening. He curled up against a wall, as the Gurbani was chanted at sunset and, as the story is told, he did not move from there the whole night. The man, who did not believe in God, just sat there in the silence of a sleeping temple to find some kind of awakening. And,

perhaps in the first light of dawn, there was a direction, the magic of a new beginning. For soon after that, he began to do something that was alien to his education and professional training. He began to find his freedom and himself, as he laboured on his first novel. He was once asked about the gurudwara incident. 'It was one of those things...a contradiction,' he said, as a matter of fact. It was more than that, as we shall see later. He had worked out his own personal religion after thinking about these things all his life. And yet sometimes, all one's thinking becomes powerless in the face of circumstances.

A latecomer to writing

There was not much that Khushwant did in the first 40 years of his life but his writing career was definitely on the horizon, although slow in coming. Though he did stints as a lawyer and a bureaucrat, he was a man trying to find his way all the time. It is strange that he did things that he did not like for many years and was, in a sense, fighting other people's expectations as well as his own choices. At some point, in his mid-life, of experimenting with what his future life would be, he got drawn to books and the literature.

The lawyer, who hated the court, started reading poetry and great contemporary writers, such as Somerset Maugham and Aldous Huxley, and the classics from Shakespeare and Walter Scott.

During his years in London, at the Indian High Commission, he was drawn to the writers and poets that he met. The freedom and openness of his creative mind attracted the ingénue Khushwant, for it had a resonance in his own. Even though he was still a decade away from his own serious writing, he did write articles from time to time. He also went to social parties where he met the great contemporary poets of the time, such as WH Auden and the Irish firebrand, Dylan Thomas.

Dylan had written a greatly acclaimed short poem, dedicated to his father, titled 'Do not go gentle into the good night/rage, rage against the dying of the light.' Khushwant liked it very much and was inspired to write his own essay, titled, 'Ungentle Into The Good Night.' There were other articles also that he wrote, some of them were published in the UK and Canada, but all his writing at that time was part of the life of a dilettante still wrestling with professional and sexual misadventures. He has written frankly about both, for they became, like everything else, stories to be written about in the later part of his life.

After this, Khushwant and his lovely wife socialised with a group of lawyers, bureaucrats and officials and, once again, life drew him towards storytelling. They were all intelligent women and men of the world, and somehow they started enjoying their evenings together, when some or most of them would write down small anecdotes or stories, even jokes, and read it aloud to the group. It used to be part of a regular evening entertainment, such as cannot be imagined in the today's world of the television and other digital distractions. So, it was at that period of time when Khushwant, the bored and despairing lawyer, began writing anecdotes and little stories to read out among a group of his friends, over his beloved Scotch. It was just a social activity where people with no real literary pretensions just got together to pass their evenings by telling one another anecdotes and stories.

But Khushwant found that, as he wrote those small sketches about people and read them out at those social gatherings, people would listen to him with great interest and also hang on to his every word. It was the first time when he realised that he could tell stories. An innocuous event, but it became a turning point in his life!

His love for stories about real people and their lives also took him to the most unlikely places. Though he did not care much for the

business of practicing law and disliked the burdensome courtrooms, Khushwant developed a strange interest towards storytelling. At times, he would leave his work and, as a visitor, attend the lower criminal courts, where there were hearings of dacoity, murder and village crime cases. He just liked to sit there and listen to the stories, and sometimes followed it up by going to the villages where they had taken place.

He did not know it then, of course, but his fate was moving along its own unseen way to direct him to his calling and the greater purpose of his life. It was taking its time in coming but the gift was coming to Khushwant—the gift of a magnificent talent of storytelling and being able to communicate his ideas. The stories were not just fiction, for they were rooted in life. And like all storytellers in all the ages, the myth makers and shamans and priests, who could transport the listener to the challenges and victories of other lives, Khushwant too found the gift. People and events, even the most cataclysmic events like India's partition in 1947, happen and pass into history but the storyteller keeps them alive.

Initially in Lahore, and later in the hill resort of Mashobra, where his father owned a villa, Khushwant turned away from the noise and the futile life, to discover his self in the silence and the mystery of nature. He found he had a natural communion with the forests and the hills, enjoyed the sounds and songs of the trees and found sanctuary in the wild abundance of life in nature. One morning, he decided to go for “a short walk”. He started walking downhill from Mashobra and enjoyed it so much that he kept on walking for more than half the day. In all, he walked almost 55 miles², downhill thankfully, until he reached the town of Kalka, located on the foothills. That was another Khushwant, a loner who was very happy being with himself. It was a trait that was to continue all his life. In the midst of everything that happened to him, and many wonderful things did happen, he was always alone with his

thoughts. He observed his surroundings all the time and, in the midst of laughter and jesting, he was always aware.

Train to Pakistan

Khushwant wrote *Train to Pakistan* in 1954, when he was about 40 years old. With nothing much happening in his life otherwise at the time, he became a recluse for nearly three months and wrote page after page of his debut novel, reliving his experiences and observations of the events related to India's partition, which he had seen from both sides of the new border. Once he had finished his novel, it was typed by a friendly American diplomat's wife in Delhi. The lady did not think much of the novel at that time and told him so. Khushwant would have certainly been disappointed, but he still went ahead and sent the manuscript to publishers in England and America. The *Grove Press* in New York published the novel and it was well received almost everywhere.

Strangely, as we are told, that at that time in the 50s in India, writing of books was not considered as a real profession and, therefore, the writers were not considered as truly professional people. Literary pursuits were expected to be dabbled in by the cultured gentlemen, but definitely not something that men of status should be doing. This is mentioned only as an oddity of the times. Although Khushwant's novel, his first and perhaps his best, was widely appreciated, there were people who thought he was just wasting his time. However, the novel changed his life. Khushwant was now firmly on his way. His lifelong romance with the world of words had now indeed begun.

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