



Khushwantnama -The Essence of Life Well- Lived

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Abstract:

In my research paper, I am going to discuss the great, creative journalist & author Khushwant Singh. I will discuss his views and reflections on retirement. I will also focus on his reflections regarding journalism, writing, politics, poetry, religion, death and longevity.

Keywords: *Controversial, Hypocrisy, Rejects fundamental concepts-suppression, Snobbish priggishness, Unpalatable views*

Khushwant Singh, the well known fiction writer, journalist, editor, historian and scholar died at the age of 99 on March 20, 2014. He always liked to remain controversial, outspoken and one who hated hypocrisy and snobbish priggishness in all fields of life. He was born on February 2, 1915 in Hadali now in Pakistan. He studied at St. Stephen's college, Delhi and king's college, London. His father Shobha Singh was a prominent building contractor in Lutyen's Delhi. He studied law and practiced it at Lahore court for eight years. In 1947, he joined Indian Foreign Service and worked under Krishna Menon. It was here that he read a lot and then turned to writing and editing.

Khushwant Singh edited ' Yojana' and ' The Illustrated Weekly of India, a news weekly. Under his editorship, the weekly circulation rose from 65000 copies to 400000. In 1978, he was asked by the management to leave with immediate effect. His departure made the circulation of the weekly slump. He toyed with politics supporting Indira Gandhi, emergency and autocratic ways of Sanjay Gandhi. However, the operation Blue Star destroyed his illusions. The massacre of Sikhs in Delhi post-assassination of Indira Gandhi shook him to the core. He realized that the Indian politics has never been truly secular. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974 which he returned in 1984 in protest against the siege of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan.

Khushwant Singh wrote book fiction and non-fiction. His novel 'Train to Pakistan'(1956) is a talk of love between Jugga, a rustic dacoit and a Muslim weaver girl. Nooran with a back drop of holocaust of Partition in 1947. The novel celebrates the victory of love over man made barriers of caste, creed, religion and nations. He wrote 'The History of Sikhs' (1963) and 'A History of Sikhs' (1963) and 'A History of Sikhs: 1839-2004, 2005' which show his profound study of Sikhism and Sikhs. He had several collections of short stories that include ' 'The Marks of Vishnu and other stories (1950) ' 'A Bride for Sahib and other stories' (1967), ' Paradise and other Stories (2004). His other remarkable novels are " 'I shall not hear the Nightingale'(1959), ' 'Delhi ': A novel (1990) and ' The Sunset Club, (2010).

'Khushwantnama-The Lessons of My Life" was published in 2013 when Khushwant Singh was 98. Here he reflects upon the life he had lived and the lessons he had learnt from life and mistakes he had made. However, he had very few regrets and complaints in life. He took life in a stride laughing, drinking and enjoying the company of beautiful women. In this book, he pens down his views on subjects like old age, death, importance of laughter, politics and politicians, journalism, writing and poetry that he loved both English and Urdu. The book contains 18 short chapters with no logical sequence. It is more of jottings and ruminations made with clear conscience and candidness. Truth

always sat upon the lips of Sardar Khushwant Singh but here is a genuine expression of a person who is happy with life lived and awaits death with willingness. He writes in the final chapter Epitaph' :

*The truth is that I want to die. I
Have lived long enough. Whatever
I wanted to do in life, I have
Done. So what is the point of
hanging on to life with nothing whatsoever
left to do ? (Khushwant Singh, 187.)*

In the beginning of the book, Khushwant Singh quotes from 'Hamlet' Act1, scene III the words of Shakespeare that epitomizes his philosophy of life. The works say:

*This above all: to twine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
(Shakespeare, Hamlet)*

In Introduction, Khushwant Singh says that he is in the final stage of life 'Sanyas' when one shuns all worldly attachments. In his case, it is not so. He still enjoys a single peg of malt whisky every evening and relishes tasty food though in small quantity. He finds pleasure in the company of beautiful women, poetry and nature. He has lived a hard working and disciplined life which has probably helped him in living healthy, active long life. However, age has affected his hearing sense and he gets tired soon. Therefore he avoids the visitors who wear him out. He likes deafness-induced silence making him contemplate on mistakes he has made. However, he has no remorse or serious regrets. He feels that writing, laughter, honesty and kindness have made his life worthwhile. In 'Khushwantnama' he shares with readers the lessons he has learnt in life.

Taking stock of life he has lived, he says that on credit side, he has over eighty books that include novels, histories, short-stories, non-fiction, biographies and translations and joke books. On debit side in his younger days of wantonness, he had killed dozen of sparrows, doves, ducks and others birds with his air gun. He feels repentance for what he had done in cruel, reckless manner. He writes, I am paying the price for my action as the memory of those innocent creatures haunts me evening after evening. (Khushwant Singh 4).

He calls himself a lecher admitting that he had always regarded women as the objects of lust (Khushwant Singh 5). Referring to his regrets in life, he says that he feels that he has wasted his years in studying law and practicing it. He also regretted his years spent in the government services in India and abroad. He feels that it would have been better, had he started his writing career earlier. Like Harivansh Rai Bachchan, he says, "Why cry over spilt milk? (Khushwant Singh 7). Bachchanji wrote,

'Jo beet Gayi so Bat Gayi'
(Whatever has passed is past).

Khushwant Singh took light breakfast and lunch but enjoyed good dinner after a peg of whisky. He liked to drink and eat in complete silence relishing every bit of food. He had always been a meat-eater and believed that vegetarianism is unnatural. He always avoided overeating.

In a chapter 'No Need to Retire Hurt', he presents his views on retirement. One may retire from work or job but not from desires. One spends youth and middle age in earning livelihood and procreation. As Ghalib wrote in one of his poems, human soul craves for fursat (leisure). Khushwant Singh believed that for happy retired life one must have financial stability, good health and some positive hobbies or interests. He adds, "But to do nothing is to become nothing, and a sure way of hastening the end. (Khushwant Singh 19).

In the chapter “ 'Nayi Dilliwalla', he remembers old days charm of Delhi and the changes that have played havoc with its architectural beauty, environment and flora and fauna. Khushwant Singh had been active in journalism and politics. He had always been a true secular at heart. In the chapter ' State of the Nation', he expresses his heart-felt concerns regarding growing intolerance and divisive politics. He writes “

"Biggest worry today to the intolerance I see in our country. We are a cowardly lot that burns books we don't like exiles artists and vandalizes their painting. We take liberties and distort history books to conform to our ideas and ideal;, we ban films and beat up journalists who write against us. We are responsible for this growing intolerance, and we are party to it if we don't do anything to prevent or stop it. (Khushwant Singh 35)

Khushwant Singh stresses on the fact that true secular state should not involve itself in any religious matter, be it Hinduism or Islam. He disapproves the Government sop to Hajj Pilgrims and protests against construction of any more places of worships, temples, shrines and so on. He calls saffron clad sadhus Parasites (37) and wants their number to be reduced drastically (37). Khushwant Singh is against astrology and all kinds of superstitious beliefs and rituals. He rejects the fundamentalist concept of Hindu Rashtra as it would result into serious challenges across Indian borders, one can learn this lesson from Pakistan that religion dominated countries suffer politically, economically and socially. Referring to politics, he says that Indian politics is polluted by corruption and lack of morality or values. Flattery (chhaploosi) is also a form of corruption that pervades Indian politics on a large scale. Khushwant Singh calls caste system in India Sigma that “ disfigures the fair face of Mother India (43). He supported Sanjay Gandhi, as he believed in more work and less talk. And also curb on population explosion. (45).

In the chapter 'The Importance of Gandhi' Khushwant Singh shows his profound respect for the Mahatma. Inspire of the fact that he drank, ate meat and indulged in lust; he calls him a Gandhian as he too, had a deep faith in truth force, honesty and commitment to human welfare like Gandhi Bapu.

It is quite interesting to read Khushwant Singh's views on religion. Born in a Sikh family, he imbibed certain virtues of a sikh and Khalsa traditions. He read the Vedas, Upanishads, the epics and religious texts of Islam, Jainism and Buddhism. He liked the beautiful words of Gurbani and the poetic language of the old Testament and Psalms. However, he remained an agnostic rejecting rituals, idol worship, the existence of God and conformist religion. He sported beard and turban like all male Sikhs but did not practice religious rituals. He adored the words of Guru Nanak who propagated that truth and truthful conduct are the facets of a true religion. He also believed that giving alms, helping others, hurting no one and remaining in buoyant spirits are characteristics of a religious man in true sense (62).

Khushwant Singh in an interview with Jagpal Singh Tiwana in ‘ 'The Sikh Times' ' said that Sikhism is a branch of Hinduism. He said, "Sikhism is a tradition developed within Hinduism. Guru Granth Sahib reflects Vedanta philosophy and Japji saheb is based on the Upanishads. (Tiwana). He did acknowledge the power of prayer and once he spent a night at Gurudwara to seek the help of the Guru during a very difficult time in his conjugal life when his wife had threatened to leave him. Khushwant Singh admitted that it was one of the contradictions as an “ emotional issue” was involved. (Tiwana). As a Student in England, he had read and discussed Bertrand Russell and attended the lectures of Harold Laski. He was impressed by socialism then but later abandoned socialistic ideas. He did retain his agnosticism all his life inspite of a few examples of contradictions.

Khushwant Singh loved Urdu poetry and Ghalib in particular besides Iqbal, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Meer Taqui Meer and so on. He has devoted one full chapter to Ghalib quoting his favorite stanza from his

Ghazals. Ghalib, of course wrote in Persian initially but later wrote in Urdu also leaving a rich treasure of poetry that readers still cherish. Famous Ghazal singers have immortalized many of his Ghazals lending them their melodious rendition.

There are three chapters in the book that dwell upon writing and journalism. In a chapter titled 'The Business of Writing' he writes that in present scenario, the whole business of writing is like a whore house where publishers are brothel keepers, literary agents' pimps and writers are women who sell their bodies (80). He believes that the Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy of today are better than R.K. Marayans and Roja Raos of the past (81). In the chapter, 'what it takes to be a writer', he reminisces about his own writing career. He admits that he is not a learned man. He started reading when he was student of law and later in the diplomatic services. During the last five decades, he almost read two to three books a week. He relished poetry more because of its musicality, and terseness. He read T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' about forty times. (85/86).

Khushwant Singh regarded Nirad Chaudhari, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Sheth as good writers who handled English language very deftly. (88). He admired Aldous Huxley and Somerset Maugham who left profound impression on him (89). He enlists his favorite works, that include Naipual's 'A House for Mr. Bishwas', Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children', Vikram Sheth's 'A Suitable Boy' and Amitav Ghosh's 'Shadow lines'.

Khushwantsingh then prescribes a few tips for aspiring writers. He says that there are no schools or classes that can teach one to become a writer. (90) He writes,

"To be a good writer, you have to be totally honest and not afraid to speak out."
(Khushwant Singh, 90)

Then, there is no substitute for reading. A good writer must be a good reader. He advises would-be writers to keep diary and write letters or emails. Reading of history and biographies, and autobiographies helps the writers a lot. Like T.S. Eliot, he believes that writers should avoid being autobiographical and personal as much as possible. And if one needs to write an autobiography, one must bare his all. While writing history, one must not merely catalogue events but put life in the historical characters so that readers can share their joy, sorrows and fears. (92/93). As a journalist, he worked with 'Yojana', 'Hindustan Times' and 'The Illustrated weekly of India'. He contributed to the 'New York Times' and the 'Statesman'. He had adopted a three pronged formula of 'inform, amuse, provoke' for his journalistic approach. He admired Frank Moraes, K.R. Iyengar, Pothan Joseph, Prem Bhatia, S. Mulgaonkar and B.G. Verghese. Khushwant Singh says that television posed a serious challenge for newspapers and other print media. He criticizes modern journalists and editors who do not do their homework properly and quite often their command of the language is poor. (100-102).

'Thinking Aloud' is a chapter that epitomizes Khushwant Singh's views on partition, the English Language paradox, prohibition, greed, sex and the qualities of a president. He says that Hindu-Muslim divide is a historical fact and partition was not merely the brain child of Jinnah. Hindu nation theory propagated by K.B. Hedgewar, V.D. Savarkar etc. goaded the Muslim League to demand separate Pakistan. Neither Nehru nor Jinnah had imagined a huge level of violence and massacre that took place at the time of partition. Only Mahatma Gandhi could comprehend the seriousness of partition and violence that accompanied it. Both Nehru and Jinnah were helpless against the tsunami of violence. (114).

Referring to the English language, Khushwant Singh says that English is the richest language in the world and it has contributed in enriching other languages. Khushwant Singh always criticized prohibition saying that prohibition actually results in promotion. He says, " "Drinking is not a vice, drunkenness is". " (Khushwant Singh, 117).

He says that since pre-vedic times, Indians had been drinking homemade stuff and on account of prohibition, people resort to poisonous brew that results into deaths of hundreds of people. According to Khushwant Singh of the five deadly sins-Kama (lust), Krodh (anger), lobh (greed), moha (attachment) and ahankar (excessive pride or egoism), greed is the deadliest of all. His views on sex had always been obsessive. His novels and other fictional as well as non-fictional works are full of erotic and quite often vulgar description of sex. He shocked his readers and critics with his overdose of sex bordering on pornography. In this chapter 'Thinking Aloud', he discusses sex calling it 'elemental' and vital. (120). He rejects the concept of celibacy as it is against nature. He also says that adultery and polygamousness are natural. According to him the pivotal of all human relationship is sexual desire. Suppression and sexual frustration in India are responsible for rapes and molestations of women. Hypocritical attitude regarding sex has aggravated many sex related crimes. Readers may often find his views unpalatable but they should be taken as his candid, unhyprocritical attitude towards all issues of life and society. (120 /121).

Writing about the qualities of a President, Khushwant Singh enumerates the following essential qualities of a good President.

1. Financially clean and above nepotism
2. Principled and one with modern outlook.
3. Free from bigotry.
4. Brave courageous and independent.

He expresses his deep regard for Dr. Abdul Kalam who stood for borderless society with borderless minds. (124). Khushwant Singh loved nature and enjoyed watching birds, trees, flowers and plants. He says that along with the process of ageing, he hated the winter chill of Delhi (132). In the chapter 'Poetry is Priceless' , he quotes Mirza Ghalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Japdi, the book of job, Kents's 'Ode to nightingale' etc. He admits that poetry had given him solace and joy in his life (137).

The most thought provoking chapter in Khushwantnama is 'Dealing with Death'. It shows his profound contemplation and reflection on one of the most important issues of human Life-Death. He lived for 99 years but he had toyed with the issue of death when he was in his twenties. He had written his own obituary which later appeared in a collection of short stories titled 'Posthumous'.

He had discussed about death with Dalai Lama and Osho Rajneesh. Dalai Lama advised him to meditate and Osho asked him to expose himself to the dying and the dead. Khushwant Singh followed his advice and attended funerals watching the dead bodies turn into ashes. He took stock of his life and felt a deep sense of gratitude and content for what he had got in life. He did not accept the concept of rebirth as he could not accept the existence of God. He agreed with Tom Stoppard who wrote: Death is the absence of presence, nothing more, the endless time of never coming back, a gap you can't see and when the wind blows through it, it makes not sound. (153).

For Khushwant Singh, death is a final full stop and a void impenetrable. The process of death actually starts the moment a person is born. He agreed to the Jain philosophy that believed that death should be celebrated and not lamented. Khushwant Singh encountered death when his wife died. He could not find solace in religious rituals being an agnostic. He also avoided the condolence visits of friends and relatives. He felt upset by their frequent calls and therefore left for Goa to be by himself. He writes about the way he would like to die. He says: When my time comes, I don't want to make an ass of myself. I don't

"to want to be burden to anyone. I don't want to cry for help or ask God to forgive me for my sins."

(Khushwant Singh, 159-160)

Like his father, Khushwant Singh also had his last last drink before parting with the world. He died without regrets and grievances against anyone with a smile on his lips. The next chapter “ 'Twelve Tips to Live Long and Be Happy” ' is truly worth putting into practice. These tips are practical and free from idealism. They come from a man who lived for ten decades and died in harness. He continued to read, write and enjoy his evening peg till he died. These twelve tips can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Regular exercises like walking, Swimming or games like tennis, squash, badminton or golf.
- (2) Vigorous massage.
- (3) Moderate intake of food with strict routine for meals.
- (4) A single peg of whisky for good appetite. (This is Singh's prescription that can be taken as optional.)
- (5) No overeating. Eat in silence.
- (6) Stick to one kind of vegetable or meat followed by a pinch of chooran. Idli-Dosa is light and healthy option.
- (7) Avoid constipation at all cost.
- (8) Healthy bank balance for freedom from financial worries.
- (9) Avoid anger; laugh often.
- (10) Lying is an aliment .Avoid it.
- (11) Be generous. Giving cleanses one's soul.
- (12) Have a hobby like gardening, music, helping children in need etc. (163-165).

Khushwant Singh believed that one must have the ability to laugh. Humour is an antidote, it is also a leveller. It is a key to healthy, happy life. It is lethal weapon for autocrats and snobs. He presents some humorous anecdotes and jokes in this chapter titled 'Humour is A Lethal Weapon'.” He also narrates his endoscopy experience in a humorous manner. Humorists have the ability to laugh at themselves as well as at their problems and pains. In Gujarati literature, a well-known humorist, Ratilal Borisagar has written a book titled 'Enjoygraphy' about his experience of Angiography.

The last chapter is titled ' Epitaph', On Independence Day 2012, he turned 98. He writes that 'Khushantnama' would probably be his last book. He would continue to contribute his biweekly columns. He says that he has achieved all that he wanted to achieve. He writes:

*“The truth is that I want to die. I have lived long enough.
Whatever I wanted to do in life, I have done. So what is
the point of hanging on to life with nothing what soever left to do? “*

(Khushant Singh, 187)

The book ends with an epitaph he had written a few years ago. It reads:

“Here lies one who spared neither man nor God
Waste not your tears on him,
he was a sodwriting nasty things he regarded as great fun
Thank the Lord he is dead, this son of a gun”.

Rahul Singh, Khushwant Singh' 's son wrote on March 21, 2014 after his father” 's death that he was mentally alert till he died even though his body was becoming weaker and weaker. As a father, recalls Rahul Singh, Khushwant Singh was a strict father. His most important characteristic was:

“ ”*He liked to puncture infected ego*”. (Rediff News)

N.M. Afzal in his review of Khushwantnama says:

“ *It is like listening to an old sage talking to you in whispers.*”

(N.M. Afzal)

'Khushwant Nama' contains sixteen chapters dealing with various topics like writing, journalism, tips for healthy life, poets and Poetry, religion, Gandhiji, death and humour. There is no logical sequence

but the strain that runs through the book is his candidness and unpretentious approach to all aspects of life. L.K. Advani in his tribute wrote:

"I must say that this book is eloquent testimony to the fact that Khushwant Singh spares no effort to be true to himself. He writes with extraordinary candour even while writing about his own self."(L.K. Advani)

The book has truly distilled wisdom that makes it a compelling read.

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