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Khushwant Singh as a True Secularist: A Study of His Essays and Articles

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Abstract:

Khushwant Singh is one of the most popular prose writers of India who along with his many fictional masterpieces has written a full body of essays and columns on numerous topics in various newspapers. The author's free-thinking outlook and ultra-straight-forward attitude finds reflection in his creative pieces of prose and he takes the responsibility of waging a war against the communal elements and forces behind these elements, and becomes a true icon of secularism in this communally sensitive society. The present paper covers his selective essays and columns published in various newspapers expressing his views on the importance of safeguarding the secular social and state set-up of India. He warns against all that is communal in the backdrop of repeated increase in the incidents having a communal hue and suggests the ways to curb this menace.

Key words: secularism, communal, fondos, sectarianism, fundamentalism, minority

Introduction

Khushwant Singh, despite being the king of controversies, remains the most popular Indian writer since last four decades or so. He is a psychologist par excellence and is well acquainted with the likings and dislikings of his readers and this quality in him enables him to keep a hand on the pulse of his readers and this gives him an advantage in catering to them what they crave for in his writings. His straightforward and candid style of writing has made him a very polarising figure among his readers—those who hail and worship him and those who mince no words in denouncing him by throwing the choicest obscenities at him. This liberated, not libertine, soul refuses to be chained by the man-made boundaries of cast, creed or religion; it soars high on the wings of liberal ethos comprising free will, freedom of conscience, space to private longings of body as well as spirit. Khushwant's philosophy of life underlines the fundamentals of his secular outlook like free thinking, reasoning, scientific temper, modernity and tolerance in life. His no hold barred attitude at times puts him into direct fight with the conservative, religion governed society of India. Though he has the knack for speaking about his own mind, he equally un.masks the people he knew and befriended, some of them very close to him, and reveals the un-revealable in the so-called civilized society, and on the basis of this naughtiness he ascended the new heights in his career as a writer. But controversies aside, he is also one of the best prose writers of contemporary India in the field of somber and serious writings. He wore many hats in his life—that of a barrister to a diplomat to an

editor to a columnist to a writer and a reviewer to a parliamentarian, and in every field he left an indelible mark. His *Train to Pakistan*, *Delhi*, *Many Faces of Communalism*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, *A History of Sikhs* and some of translations remain his magnum opuses. It is in his articles and columns written on everything under the sun that Khushwant Singh is at his wittiest but informative and interactive best. He is always guided by the reason and logic in his thoughts and this makes him a vociferous critic of discrimination and selectivism on the basis of caste, religion or nationality prevalent in any society. He regards goodness of heart the highest quality of a human being where one is free from all sorts of dogmas which arrest the free thinking and blind people to reality. No other writer expresses his secular outlook so audaciously and fearlessly as Khushwant Singh.

It is his unabashed manner of writing columns and prose compositions on personalities and issues numerous that he instantly develops a rapport with his readers; his love for tearing apart the human hypocrisies brutally earns him many a foe but he today even in his late 90's continues to enlighten people with his wisdom and logic. That his unbridled spirit refuses to accept any constraints on it becomes obvious when he identifies himself a proud agnostic who believes that every thing noble and righteous must not be seen through the narrow prism of religious, communal or territorial boundaries. He repudiates all that is associated with the names of religious bigotry and fundamentalism; he can not accept the division of humanity on the basis of faith and beliefs, and whoever tries to do so or advocates this has always been in his firing line. In his works he repeatedly reveals his pained and anguished self at what happened after partition on religious lines at the hands of religious fundamentalists on both sides. There are recurring glimpses of Khushwant's democratic and secular outlook in his writings—his scathing attack on terrorism in Punjab for separate statehood, his criticism of the State machinery during Delhi Sikh riots (1984), of Advani's Rath Yatra and demolition of Babri Masjid and Ram Janam Bhumi movement in Ayodhya, Godhra incident in Gujrat and his hailing of Nehru as a true secular. In his creative pieces generally in the form of biographical sketches speak of his abhorrence for communal forces and love for secularism—a world free from all types of man-made barriers.

The rise of fundamentalism in India over the years has many things to account for. Along with India's history and its diversified composition comprising different demographic and topographic distinctiveness of religions, castes, languages, dialects and cultural ethos, the role played by our politicians, mixing religion with politics and arousing the sentiments of the common people for their vested political interests contributed a lot in spreading the mistrust and hostility among them. Khushwant Singh's essays and columns give his readers a peep into his disturbed soul on account of increase in incidents of extremism, and he voicing his strong disapproval of those spitting fire in the name religion tries to bulldoze them mercilessly.

Discussion

Through his journey of more than nine decades what disturbed most this sensuous-personified but the noble hearted Khushwant Singh was the rise of

communalism where everything despicable against humanity was justified in the name of religious lineage or superiority, and he has continuously kept on expressing his anguish against the repeated acts of violence by the fundamentalists that he has witnessed in his life. Though he grew up in the volatile situation prevailing in the pre-partition India caused by the rise of Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha which further deteriorated during partition; still what appalled him more so were the incidents and the misdeeds of the extremists, most of them belonging to the majority community and these started occurring predominantly in the 1980's in independent India and continues till today. About the dark times of 1990's Khushwant writes:

“The nineties were dark times for India. Fascism well and truly crossed our threshold and dug its heels in our courtyard. We let the fanatics get away with every step they took without raising a howl of protest. They burnt books they did not like; they beat up journalists who wrote against them; they openly butchered people for believing in a different God.”(Khushwant Singh, *Absolute Khushwant*, 124)

Khushwant Singh insinuates in his writings time and again that it is the majority community not the minorities that poisons the hearts of the common country-folk and instigates them by rousing their communal dislike for the people belonging to other communities. The politics of certain parties he asserts revolves around the religion based vote-bank card and they play it with all brazenness, behaving totally alien to the ethics in polity. Singh has a sinking feeling when he expresses his fear about the tactics adopted by certain political parties:

“The fascist agenda of Hindu fanatics is unlike anything India has experienced in its modern history. The saffron tide was raising and I was very afraid that it would destroy the nation. For the first time, I was seriously concerned for the country's future. Modi is a murderer. And Advani and he have a symbiotic relationship—they help each other. Modi helps Advani win elections from Gandhinagar and Advani in return exonerates him from the charges of the 2002 Gujrat riots.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 124-125)

Though Khushwant is at times accused of bias against BJP and toeing the line of Congress because of the favours he enjoyed from its leaders by eulogizing or defending them, but the fact remains that he clubs even the Congress party with the right-wing parties and takes pot-shot at it for its communal conduct:

“He [Khushwant Singh] does not see the demon of communalism in saffron only, as the title *The Sangh and its Demons* might suggest, but has pointed out that all religions have and will continue to have bigots who give the founders of their religion and their teachings a bad name, but his basic focus remains on the "Hinduisation of Indian Politics". Khushwant Singh points out that India did not declare itself a Hindu state, even though

all its neighbours became religious states—Pakistan became Islamic: Sri Lanka and Burma, Buddhist; and Nepal, Hindu.” (Roopinder Singh, ‘Cautionary treatise, wake-up call’, *Spectrum, The Tribune*, April 20, 2013)

Like any other person who was a first hand witness to the bloodbath during partition Khushwant Singh’s benign spirit believes in the path of righteousness in human affairs and his love for humanity, for his brethren irrespective of the community they belonged to or the religion they worshipped is all evident in his relations and writings. But at the slightest hint of bias or intolerance in one’s behaviour puts him off permanently towards such a fanatic. He had great respect for Advani both as a man and a politician in the beginning but when the latter took the Rathyatra leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid and polarised the people of the country on the religious lines Khushwant became his bitter critic and vouched not to forgive him for the irreparable damage to the social, cultural harmony between the Hindus and Muslims.

“Advani’s rath yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 was the one event that pithchforked him to the centrestage and reshaped India’s politics. Advani, more than anyone else, sensed that Islamophobia was deeply ingrained in the minds of millions of Hindus and it needed only a spark to set it ablaze...At an event at IIC I even told Advani to his face, in front of an audience, ‘You have sowed the seeds of communal disharmony in the country and we are paying the price for it.’” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 126-127)

As everyone’s outlook and personality has the imprint of one’s experiences and upbringing in one’s life, Khushwant’s sensibilities were also shaped by all these things in his life. He confesses at one stage in his life that he developed predisposition towards the Muslims in his earlier days but all his inklings towards them were cleared when he came in contact with certain Muslims and developed a life-long bonding with them. Sadia Dahlvi in her piece on Khushwant *My Friend Khushwant* mentions this fact:

“Khushwant once confessed that, in his younger days, he had nurtured a prejudice towards Muslims, but it was his friendship with the well-known Manzoor Qadir feom Lahore which cleansed him of his biases. The symbols of Islam in his house are tribute to the memory of his closest friends.”(Rohini Singh[Ed], *A Man Called Khushwant Singh*, 125)

The writer lambasts the fanatics belonging to any sect or religion for propagating the fear psychosis among the masses to serve their narrow selfish ends because he feels it is the ambience which plays an all important role in making an individual a liberal democrat or a communal bigot. He is aghast at the intolerance of the people in India, across all the religions, who have been transformed into petro-bombs and are ready to set ablaze the ideology they do not find favour with as well as the people belonging to other community. There is no acceptance or respect for another’s religion or faith ad thus

devoid of any streak of reasoning or rationality in their thoughts because in their recesses of mind the seeds of enmity and hatred have been shown by these religious fundos. His criticism of the hate speech by Varun Gandhi, or the despicable murder of Christian missionary Graham Stains or the Gujrat riots speak of his secular credentials. Such cynicism and barbarism in the name of religion Khushwant fears will lead this nation to nowhere but abysmal gloom and the future generations will never forgive us for all this trading in hate.

There are people or organizations with licence to check the flow of free thinking or expression, even in the artistic field. Maqbool Hussain, a great artist, had to leave this country and take refuge in the alien land and that towards at the fag end of his life; movies are repeatedly banned be it *Water* by Meera Nair or Sada Haque; publications of books or sale is stopped or banned, even for the publication of his own autobiography Khushwant Singh had to fight the legal battle; plays are stopped from being staged. The bigots stifle the fresh air of free artistic expression and they always have a free hand in this regard. According to Khushwant Singh, even changing of names of cities, streets, or Govt. or public places like universities, colleges, stadiums have their genesis in the theory of appeasing the religious sentiments of a particular community or sect. He questions the patronising attitude of former Prime Minister VP Singh towards the people belonging to a particular class, and feels that there is ‘method in madness’ of the politicians with regard to the spread of communal fever:

“Communalism? We have communalized politics and politicians rouse communal passions to retain power. If instead of being organized on religious lines we were to organize our society on the basis of common economic interests—farmers, weavers, factory workers, etc.—we would with one stroke kill the canker of communalism and bring the fruits of development to the people.” (Khushwant Singh, *Malicious Gossip*, 110)

This patronising attitude for religious selectivism fans the fire of suspicion and mistrust among the people and leads to communal divide and hostility, finally culminating in violence.

Khushwant is very much concerned about the increasing intolerance among Indians towards their fellow brethren about their beliefs, faith and attitudes and in such a scenario the people belonging to the minority find themselves at the receiving end. This leads to the development of hostility among the people and further divide and violence. The author reveals the insecurity felt by the minorities deep down their hearts as their every move is viewed with suspicion:

“I felt they [Muslims] were discriminated against and were under a cloud for supposedly harbouring pro-Pakistani sympathies. Every time there was tension with Pakistan their loyalties became more suspect. They found it difficult to get jobs in the government and almost impossible to get them in privately-owned industry and business houses which are largely

controlled by Hindus. They had virtually no form to ventilate their grievances, except Urdu newspapers which had small circulations restricted to their own community...Whenever there was a Hindu-Muslim riot, since most of the loss of life and property was Muslim, I adopted a distinctly pro-Muslim stance.”(Khushwant Singh, *Truth, Love & A Little Malice: An Autobiography*, 255)

The life of ordinary God-fearing Indians is governed and controlled by the dogmatic religious, communal beliefs which are generally defined as cultural. Caste and religion ridden Indian society is becoming head-strong day-by-day where there is no space or respect for dissent. The humanist in Khushwant is compelled to stand for all that is good for mankind—a world devoid of any kind of malice or bias on grounds of caste, colour or creed, religion, language or nationalities, and he has been using the most powerful tool in his hand—pen—to demolish and discard these goons or the organizations harbouring them for almost four decades or so. Khushwant Singh in his essay *My Biggest Worry: Intolerance* expresses his apprehension about the rise of fascist forces:

“My only worry today is the rise in right-wing fascist parties in the country....We allowed them to dig its heels in our courtyard. We let them get away with every step they took and never raised a howl of protest. Today they burn books they do not like; they beat up journalists who write against them; they attack cinema houses showing films they do not approve of; they vandalise the paintings of India’s leading artist; they pervert texts from history books to make them conform to their ideas; they foul-mouth everyone who disagree with them. We fail to hit back because we never have been a united force and do not realize the perils of allowing our country to fall into their hands.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 42-43)

Politics Singh argues with religious hue is the most important factor which transforms simple beauty-loving folks into headstrong bigots and intolerants and this serves the purpose of hardliners in the political arena. Though the saffron party or its sister concern remains in the firing line of the author yet the other parties with their ideology, if any, governed by communal beliefs also invites brickbats from him. He remains a fierce critic of those politicizing the religion:

“I have always maintained that religion and politics do not go together; they must be kept apart at all cost. What in Nehru’s time were parties of marginal importance, the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Jan Sangh, the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal, gathered strength and became the main opposition to secular forces. The young, the present generation, should be aware of the rise in communal politics and the dangers involved. If India is to survive as a nation and march forward, it must remain one country, reassert its secular credentials and throw out communally parties from the political arena.

What concerns me is how narrow-minded and intolerant we Indians have become.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 43)

Despite India’s division on religious ground, India started its post-independence journey as a secular country and Nehru as Khushwant Singh believes was the greatest face of secularism but with the passage of time the communal forces started gaining ground, including Congress party (1984 Sikh riots), and gradually the shape and colour of Indian polity changed. In his essay *Rajiv and Rahul Gandhi* he calls Rahul a better and more astute leader entirely on the ground that he appears more secular when he decides to take head-on to the Shiv sainiks in comparison to his father Rajiv who made a very pathetic, divisive statement at the death of Mrs Gandhi when thousands of Sikhs were murdered in cold blood.

The writer is dismayed that despite India claiming to be a secular state as per the constitution of country the Indians as a unit have failed to implement what is enshrined in our constitution in its true spirit. A fear psychosis prevails in the country where the minorities, particularly the non-Hindus have to prove their nationality and loyalty to the constitution of India. Such things vitiate the communal bonhomie of the all-inclusive Indian society where the delicate thread of peaceful co-existence is pulled apart from the opposite directions by the vested parties, and these narrow minded stake-holders instigate the communal instincts and pose a danger to the still peaceful but full of suspicion and mistrustful ambience toward one-another. He recalls in one of his essays how he felt chill down his spine during the Sikh riots in Delhi, thinking himself like a Jew in Nazi Germany or the follower of Russian communists during McCarthyism in the USA. The biggest contribution Khushwant Singh wanted to make to the mankind was to demolish and destroy the communal forces, and he did his best but still down the line feels that he could have done better in this regard and expresses his regrets for not doing much. In his essay *My Regrets* this greatest exponent of freedom of speech and expression gives vent to his regrets:

“My...regret is that I could have played a bigger role in my battle against the fundooos, religious fundamentalists. My columns have a vast readership, and I have written more against fundamentalists. My battle is against fundooos from all communities. I have spoken out against the Muslim fundamentalists, against Hindu fundamentalists, and though I have no personal quarrel with Advani I believe he has changed the entire map of this country.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 41)

Conclusions

The age-old harmonious but fragile social structure of the country started developing cracks at the onslaught of the communal forces in absence of any resistance from the rational, progressive thinking Indians who Khushwant Singh firmly believes have the potential to take head on to those vitiating the social fabric of this country. The author for a better and secure, united India exhorts all those who have saner heads particularly the young Indians to rise on the occasion and teach such divisive people or

organizations a lesson. Roopinder Singh in his review of Khushwant Singh's *The End of India* remarks:

“Khushwant Singh's assertion that religion and politics do not go together and must be kept apart at all cost will find wide support, especially given the experience in the sub-continent.” (Roopinder Singh, 'Cautionary treatise, wake-up call', *Spectrum*,)

Whoever talks about or instigates the people on communal ground should be socially, culturally boycotted or incarcerated because the present lawmakers Khushwant Singh feels bathed in their party ideology of sham secularism give a dismal hope in bringing about any legal remedy in the legislature which puts a check on themselves. Freedom of expression and worship as enshrined in our constitution must be maintained otherwise our future as a democratic state where all enjoy equal rights is bleak. The people across all the religions will have to understand and reciprocate with regard to one- another's opinion, ideas, faith and beliefs. They have to develop a feeling of tolerance and acceptance among themselves because until one respects other's right to have his free healthy opinion democracy can not function in its true spirit. One has the right not only in a democratic country but also in the realm of humanity to worship his deity, to follow the voice of his conscience, to practise his own principles, and it is very much in the domain of righteousness but as the author in his writing implies that one doesn't have the right to despise or loathe others on the basis of these narrow margins. This very right is also gifted to all of us by our constitution by providing freedom of speech and expression. In his essay entitled *My Biggest Worry: Intolerance* Khushwant remarks:

“To be parochial and reject people because they aren't from the same state or speak a different language is un-Indian. It is alarming to see educated people express views that don't reflect their liberal education. On the contrary, I have often found them to be the most bigoted, prejudiced, fanatic of them all.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 44)

This is a dismal scenario where even the educated class seems to be posing more subtle threat to our already under-attack secular credentials. But the author doesn't let pessimism control his inner strength and believes that there can be a way out; he is hopeful and becomes promising when he thinks about the youth of this country who can provide a remedy to this cancerous disease of communalism:

“This communal violence' these prejudices, is what worries me the most about this country. I'm not optimistic but one should fight, one should make every single effort to save the country and openly challenge and take on the men who are creating trouble and destroying the country. We have to battle with them at any cost, give it back to them, abuse for abuse. If we love our country we have to save it from these communal forces. Even though the liberal class is shrinking I do hope that the present generation totally rejects communal and fascist policies.” (*Absolute Khushwant*, 133)

The author looks forward towards the youth of this country with the hope that they with their progressive, critical thinking will rise above the narrow-mindedness and provide a puff of fresh air in the stifling atmosphere created by the extremists by renouncing their divisionary tactics and will lead us to a world where all are equal and their bonding speaks of mutual respect and love for all.

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