

**Khushwant Singh: An Unequivocal Spokesman
of Politics in *Truth, Love & a Little Malice:*
*An Autobiography***

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Khushwant Singh, perhaps India's most widely read and controversial writer has been a witness to most of the major events in modern Indian history – from Independence to Partition and has known many of the figures who have shaped it. In *Truth, Love & a Little Malice: An Autobiography*, he writes of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, controversial figures like General Tikka Khan of Pakistan, and the first Indian High Commissioner to England, Krishna Menon. He saw the imperfections within the people who shaped India's politics and was not afraid of speaking out against them. His empathy for the people who suffered, and hatred for the people who became butchers during the partition is well worth reading. In an autobiography, where we least suspect it, he takes up the subjects of partition and independence of India, and the accompanying communal riots, and gives us an insight into events which were integral to the political history of India. With clarity and candour, he writes of the things that went wrong, and also gives his unambiguous comments on the wrongs done to the innocent victims of those situations.

This article comments on Khushwant Singh's forthright views on the issues related to the topographical partition of India, whether partition was the best thing for the concerned two nations (that is India and Pakistan), and also how he viewed the subsequent changes that came with it in the subcontinent. Side by side, also

taken into consideration is Moulana Abul Kalam Azad's opinions and judgments on the matter of partition from his quasi-autobiography, *India Wins Freedom* (1959; comp. version 1988), in which he shows his open-mindedness and understanding of the crisis that defines India today.

The author, Khushwant Singh was born in 1915 in Hadali, Paunjab. He was educated at Government College, Lahore and at King's College and the Inner Temple in London. He was sent on diplomatic positions in Canada and London and later went to Paris with UNESCO. He began his distinguished career as a journalist with All India Radio in 1951. Subsequently, he became the founder-editor of *Yojana*, editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The National Herald*, and *The Hindustan Times*. Today he is India's best known columnist and journalist. Khushwant Singh was a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sava, from 1980 to 1986. Among other honors, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974 by the President of India. (He returned the decoration in 1984, in protest against the Union Governments siege of the Golden Temple, Amritsar.)

As Khushwant Singh mentions in the book, he was in Lahore, venturing on his new career as a lawyer, when the First World War was raging in Europe and the Far East. He had strong anti-fascist views and was convinced that Hitler, Mussolini, their European allies, and the Japanese had to be defeated before India could really become free. He had strong belief that Subhash Chandra Bose could never be a puppet in anyone's hand. He was disillusioned when Stalin made his pact with Hitler. His communist illusions were restored partly when they went to war against each other.

In *Autobiography*, Khushwant Singh deals with partition not as a Hindu or a Muslim or a Sikh; he was above communalism and

spoke unequivocally against it. Before we comment on Singh's assessment of the situation, it is necessary to know the reason of the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims that was created by the British to widen the communal gap that already existed. Though the Indian National Congress, the premier body of the nationalist opinion, was ecumenical and widely representative in some respects, Indian Muslims were encouraged, initially by the British, to forge a distinct political and cultural identity. In order to win them over to their side, the British helped establish the M.A.O. College at Aligarh and supported the All-India Muslim Conference, both of which were institutions from which leaders of the Muslim League and the ideology of Pakistan emerged. As soon as the League was formed, Muslims were placed on a separate electorate. Thus the idea of the separateness of Muslims in India was built into the electoral process of India. The Muslim League arose as an organization intended to enhance the various political, cultural, social, economic, and the religious interest of the Muslims.

The Muslim League gained power also due to the complex nature of politics pursued by the Congress. The Congress banned any support for the British during the Second World War. However, the Muslim League pledged its full support, which found favour for them from the British, who also needed the help of the Muslim army. The Civil Disobedience Movement and the consequent withdrawal of the Congress party from politics also helped the League gain power, as they formed strong ministries in the provinces that had large Muslim populations. At the same time, the League actively campaigned to gain more support from the Muslims in India, especially under the guidance of dynamic leaders like Jinnah.

As is well known, Mr. Jinnah's Pakistan scheme is based on his two nation theory. His thesis is that India contains many nationalities

based on religious differences. Of them the two major nations, the Hindus and the Muslims, must as separate nations have separate states. When Dr. Edward Thompson once pointed out to Mr. Jinnah that, Hindus and Muslims live side by side in thousands of Indian towns, villages, and hamlets, Mr. Jinnah replied that this in no way affected their separate nationality. Two nations, according to Mr. Jinnah, confront one another in every hamlet, village and town, and he, therefore, desires that they should be separated into two states. But Moulana Azad opposing Jinnah, cited the example of the Jews and said that one can sympathize with the aspiration of the Jews for such a national home, as they are scattered all over the world and cannot in any region have any effective voice in the administration. He noted that the conditions of Indian Muslims are quite otherwise. Over 90 million in number, Indian Muslims are in quantity and quality a sufficiently important element in Indian life to influence decisively all questions of administration and policy. Nature has further helped them by concentrating them in certain areas.

In handling the question of independence of India, Khushwant Singh notes about the negative impression of the Cripps Mission on the Indians. The failure of this mission led to widespread disappointment and anger in the country. Many Indians felt that the Churchill cabinet had sent the mission due to pressures from the Chinese and American Governments. The long-drawn negotiations between many parties in India were merely to prove to the outside world that the lack of unity amongst the Indians was the real reason why the British could not hand over power to a one India.

As a lawyer of the Lahore court, Singh watched the wide divisions raging between the Muslims and the Hindus on the one hand, and the Muslims and the Sikhs on the other. Except for some superficial social keeping-up appearances, in situations in upper-class societies,

everywhere else the racial riots and carnage were going out of proportions to everybody's horror.

After the Muslim League's demand for a separate state for Muslims to be named as Pakistan, the growing dissent became wider. Singh saw the unsuspecting Sikhs were hanged by ropes and stabbed. Nightlife was disrupted by sudden outburst of cries like *Allah-O-Akbar* from one side and *Sat Sri Akaal* or *Har Har Mahadev* from the other side in the same locality. Singh felt that the Muslims were more confident as they would come close to the Hindu or Sikh localities and shout – Beware, we wait our quarry.

When killings of the Hindus and the Sikhs were going on in the North-West Frontier Province, he describes an incident he met with as he was coming to Lahore from Abbotabad. He boarded a train at Taxila, he heard some noises when it stopped at the outer station, little knowing that all the Sikh passengers of the train were being dragged out and murdered cold-bloodedly by the Muslims. It stopped at the station and he was the only passenger left unhurt. He immediately bolted the door of the cabin and saved his life. The next day he learnt from the paper about the mayhem, and thanked god for his narrow escape. Another incident similar to this happened in Badami Bagh, where the train was stopped and all the Sikh passengers were hauled out and hacked to death by the Muslims. Singh felt that the Muslims in Punjab were better organized and motivated than the Hindus and the Sikhs were. He jeered at the so called urban brave Sikhs as "a pathetic lot: they boasted of their martial prowess while having none, and waved long kirpans that they had never wielded before." (111)

Singh was aggrieved to see the prolonged Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta, the massacres of Muslim in Bihar and East Bengal, the

mindless killings of the Sikhs and the Hindu everywhere. But still he was fearless to walk down the very road on which Sikhs were being killed; he felt no communal riot can take away his freedom to do what he wished. Khushwant Singh did not have any kind of biased attitude towards people. He did not consider his fellowmen as Hindus or Muslims; to him all were equal, irrespective of race, religion or sects. He was disgusted when he heard any Sikh or Hindu degrading a Muslim or vice versa. When it became known that India was going to be partitioned, the Hindus and the Muslims began to put up their claims. Lahore became the battleground for communalists. An almost parallel situation arose in Calcutta. In those difficult times innocent people suffered the most. Thousands of people, mostly Hindus and Sikhs, were leaving Lahore, which was earmarked for Pakistan. Many people got strangled in refugee camps, railway stations, and pavements. He watched the magnitude of tragedy that came along with the partition. The country was free, but before the people could enjoy the sense of liberation and victory, that a great tragedy accompanied this freedom. Rivers of blood flowed in many parts of the country. As Singh reflects, "It was like a person who feels no hurt when his arms or legs are cut off: the pain comes after sometime." (114)

Gradually the whole country was plunged in lawlessness. As everything else, the Indian Army was divided; nothing could be done to stop the innocent killings of the Hindus and the Muslims. In *India Wins Freedom*, Moulana Azad also talks about the helplessness of the situation. At those moments of difficulty, Moulana Azad gave shelter to many people of diverse religions in his house. He even put up tents in his compound to accommodate them. During this time of lawlessness, Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy of India,

handled the crisis with his military expertise and brought the situation under control.

Khushwant Singh felt that the partition of India was done rather in haste. India gained her freedom but lost her unity. A new state came into being. The only result of the creation of Pakistan was to weaken the position of the 45 million Muslims who remained in India. In fact it is Moulana Azad's observation that the creation of Pakistan has solved no problem. Though one may argue that the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims had become so estranged in India that there were no options left, but the situation after the partition showed that it did not improve the communal harmony. The basis of partition was the enmity between the Hindus and the Muslims. The creation of Pakistan gave the communal conflict a constitutional form and made it much more difficult to solve. The most regrettable feature of the partition is that it divided India into two states, which still today looks at each other with hatred and fear. Enmity defines the relationship between the two countries. Pakistan believes India will not rest unless it totally destroys her, similarly India thinks Pakistan will attack her whenever she gets the opportunity. This had led both the states to increase their defense expenditure and cause national wastage of fund, which could have been used for economic development of the two countries. Some people hold that whatever happened was inevitable; others strongly believe that what has happened was wrong and could have been avoided. As Moulana Azad says, "history alone will decide whether we had acted wisely and correctly." (248)

Many years after the partition, the two nations are still trying to heal the wounds left behind by this incision to once-whole body of India. The two countries started off with ruined economies and lands and without an established, experienced system of government. They

lost many of their dynamic leaders, such as Gandhi, Jinnah and Allama Iqbal. Just in less than a quarter of a century of its independence, Pakistan had to face the separation of Bangladesh in 1971. India and Pakistan have been to war three times since the partition, along with recent face-off over Kargil, and the Kashmir issue is a horrendous boiling point in the two countries' approach towards pacification as Moulana Azad explained the crux of the problem very succinctly in one of his statements in 1946: "Such division of territories into pure and impure is un-Islamic and is more in keeping with orthodox Brahmanism which divides men and countries into holy and unholy - a division which is a repudiation of the very spirit of Islam."

The same kind of opinion is voiced by Khushwant Singh who feels that dividing India on the basis of the Hindus and the Muslims was the worst thing that could happen to the people concerned, as some of them had to leave behind all their belongings, and near and dear ones simply because they were Hindus or Muslims.

Apart from his political broadsides, Khushwant Singh also brings in such personalities as Krishna Menon, the maverick diplomat, later to become the Home Minister of India, to throw light on the gross favoritism that was shown by no less a person than Nehru. He is of the opinion that Menon was responsible to some extent in influencing Jawaharlal Nehru to think about dividing India.

According to Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, when the World War II broke out, Krishna Menon extracted funds from the Government to carry on propaganda in London on behalf of India. He also prepared schemes asking fund from India which he was given. Moulana Azad, like Singh got the impression that he was not a man to be trusted. This suspicion was later voiced by Gandhiji also who

was against Menon's appointment. The subsequent event proved that their suspicion was right. When the Interim Government was formed before the partition, Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to appoint Krishna Menon as the High Commissioner to London. The Viceroy of India, Lord Wavell, immediately opposed it. But when Lord Wavell resigned and left India, Krishna Menon came to India and stayed with Pandit Nehru and it was perceived that Nehru was at that time influenced by Krishna Menon.

When Lord Mountbatten, who came to replace Wavell as the next Viceroy, saw that Jawaharlal had a weakness for Menon, he immediately sensed that Menon could be used as an instrument to convince Pandit Nehru on his scheme of partition. It is Moulana Azad's view that Menon did influence Nehru's mind on this question and Menon was used as a pawn by Lord Mountbatten. Otherwise why would Nehru suddenly become convinced that partition was the only solution to the rising communal differences in India? So it was not surprising that Lord Mountbatten offered to support Menon as the High Commissioner to London. Thus a nation was divided to fulfill the selfish interest of some people.

Khushwant Singh predicted the outbreak of renewed hostilities between India and Pakistan that came with the war fought over the liberation of Bangladesh. He widely covered the war being commissioned by *The New York Times*. He wrote many articles and features speaking in favour of Bangladeshis, which earned him wide acclaim but also evoked anger of many, including the Pakistani Government, whom he dubbed as the "Butcher of the Bangladesh". After the liberation war of Bangladesh, he visited Pakistan "to see how Zulfikar Bhutto was doing and how a defeated Pakistan was taking the drubbing of its army." (249)

He was the first Indian journalist to interview General Tikka Khan immediately after the war, who was still smarting under the ignominious defeat inflicted by the Indian army. Tikka Khan maintained that the allegations brought against the Pakistan army were totally untrue. They were fabricated lies told by the Indian army, forgetting the fact that it was the Indian army who saved the Pakistani prisoners of wars from being lynched by the Bangladeshi mobs. Tikka Khan further alleged that the Indian army trained the Bangladeshis for guerrilla warfare and provided them with arms. Singh protested by saying that he had visited Bangladesh soon after the war and had heard from Bangladeshi troops stories of atrocities committed by the Pakistani troops and officers. He denounced General Yahya Khan's regime and General Tikka Khan's genocide of Bangladesh. However *The Illustrated Weekly* happened to be the only Indian journal, which put pressure on the Government to release 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war when the war was over. He also led a delegation to call on Mrs. Gandhi to felicitate the release. When Mrs. Gandhi tried to snub him by telling him he knew nothing about politics, Singh agreed with her and replied, "Mrs. Gandhi, I believe that what is morally wrong can never be politically right. Holding prisoners of war after the war is morally wrong." (256)

Singh was the only Indian pressman in Islamabad when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged in Rawalpindi jail. He also got a detailed account of the last days of Bhutto and was able to see the reactions of the Pakistanis on the hanging of their leader. He was also the only Indian journalist to interview General Zia-Ul-Haq of Pakistan.

Khushwant Singh was a witness to many other political changes that came about in India, including the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi to contain the growing dissention in the country.

When Indira Gandhi imposed censorship on newspapers, Singh resolved not to give in to the censorship. He supported the move to clamp down on law-breakers but felt that censorship of the press would prove counter-productive for Indira Gandhi as it would deprive her of the support of the press. Singh was always a staunch supporter of Indira Gandhi and continued to support her and her son Sanjay Gandhi even after she was voted out of power.

When Khushwant Singh was a member of the Rajya Sabha, the Sikh agitation reached a crescendo and the army stormed the Golden Temple (code named as Operation Blue Star). The incident caused great havoc at the sacred religious precincts and took thousands of innocent lives. When Singh attended a big congregation of the Sikhs, he saw the hypocrisy of its leader as they professed to bring the wayward Sikhs to the right path. They declared that they would like to douse the Sikhs who drink whiskey in kerosene oil and set fire to them. Singh ironically reflects that these very Sikh leaders were the ones who had taken Scotch at his home. He observes that Sikh leaders knew that their own man was responsible for killing innocent people in the name of religion, but they used those very same men to hit the Government with. When the Government was planning of closing in on Golden Temple to catch the terrorist Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Singh knew that attacking the Temple would rouse the wrath of the entire Sikh community and subsequently warned the government against it. But Indira Gandhi paid no heed and the great onslaught of the army occurred and thousands of innocent people who came on pilgrimage died in that deadly operation. Singh believes there could have been other ways of capturing the terrorists residing in the temple. It would have taken longer but could have been comparatively bloodless. He regarded Bhindranwale as an evil man who deserved to be dead,

but storming of the Temple went beyond that, as Singh says, “it was a well-calculated and deliberate slap in the face of the entire community” (326). Singh felt he had to register his protest and immediately denounced and returned the Padma Bhushan award bestowed on him by the government.

Khushwant Singh’s autobiography is a sort of platform to deal with his personal and professional triumphs as well as his failure, but sometimes he transcends those personal feelings and fears and gives us a glimpse of more serious matters which shaped India’s future. Very subtly he takes up the matter of politics and does not hesitate to comment forthrightly on these vulnerable issues and also act where necessary. He does not believe in God. He was on the hit list of the Khalistani terrorists and makes fun of it and says maybe he was a soft target and getting him would have given them some publicity, which they badly needed. He was fully aware of the brevity of life: there is so much to do and little time to do it. He valued literature above religious scriptures. He thinks of idleness as a self-inflicted, time wasting disease, which afflicts lethargic people. He reveals himself without shame and remorse. He wrote this autobiography to achieve the goal as advocated by Benjamin Franklin:

If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten
Either write things worth reading
Or do things worth writing.

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