

TRUTH, LOVE AND A LITTLE MALICE : AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Khushwant Singh

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*A Review by Surjit Kaur**

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The much awaited autobiography of the legendary Khushwant Singh has been finally published and launched with a lot of fanfare a few months ago. Several editions have been printed and sold. It still remains virtually a best seller in the market among nonfiction literature.

In certain ways, this is the autobiography of a Sikh of eminence who has made tremendous difference in Sikh Affairs without laying any claims to being a good Sikh himself. I am reading this book for the second time, first I read it to go through the story, and now to linger and enjoy his style and share some of the pulsating feelings behind all that his pen has portrayed. A book worthy of the icon of our age, and worthy of educated, cultured homes of all those people who care about the future of human race.

Whereas Khushwant Singh's childhood days were filled with recitation of *Gurbani* (by his late grandmother), humming in his ears, his marriage to his once stunningly beautiful wife, Kanwal Malik was also determined and solemnized under aegis of the Sikh prayer book 'under his pillow'. In his own words the story goes as follows:

"The families were known to each other, but the Maliks knew very little about me as a person. They rang me up, I invited them to tea in my digs. They arrived a little before time and were shown to my room. Mrs. Malik took a good look around. She sat on my bed and lifted the pillow. She found a Gutka (a Sikh daily prayerbook) under it... She made up her mind... Finally it was the small prayerbook under the pillow which proved to be my trump card" (72).

Kanwal being a beautiful woman who had many admirers hovering around, and Khushwant Singh being absorbed in his writing of novels (e.g. *Train to Pakistan* and *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale*), she once threatened to leave him. Then, too, he found solace in Guru in Gurdwara Bangla Sahib where he sat and prayed all night.

When Khushwant Singh - an LI.M. from London University - decided to make writing a career, he wanted to specialize in one subject and convey the impression that he knew

it better than anyone else, his choice was his own community. The chapter, "Sikh Religion and Sikh History" bears a testimony to the commitment Khushwant Singh has to his profession of writing and his sense of fulfillment upon completion of his authoritative *History of the Sikhs*, published in two volumes in 1969, and meticulously revised at the Wilson Center, Washington DC, in 1988. The Sikh community acknowledged him and honored him by inviting him to address many a congregation at Gurdwaras. At the tricentenary of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday, he was invited as the guest of Honor to address the Sikhs of England gathered at Royal Albert Hall in London. He spoke on Guru Gobind Singh's concept of *Dharam Yudh* - the battle for the sake of righteousness. His speech was greeted with thunderous cries of "*bolely so Nihal, Sat Sri Aka!*". His response, "I was proud of my performance and very proud not only of being Sikh but that Sikhs were proud of me" (269).

So much for Khushwant Singh - the Sikh. Reading through the 423 pages of his autobiography, devoid of any photographs of the most photogenic author and his good-looking family, one is moved deeply by the trials and tribulations of a man who made hard decisions in the prime of his life and faced the consequences with total sense of responsibility and faith in his destiny as a writer. He was trained as a lawyer in England, and he started his practice in Lahore and soon he realized how much he disliked the profession. He writes:

"Perhaps it was my failure to make it big in the legal profession, I asked myself 'Is there anything creative in practicing law? Don't I owe more to the one life I have than making money out of other people's quarrels?' A common prostitute renders more service to society to society than a lawyer..." (89).

His stint with the Foreign Service as the Press Attache of Indian High Commission in England ended quickly because of a personality conflict with VK Krishna Menon; his enjoyable stay in Paris where he held a prestigious position with UNESCO ended due to his feelings of guilt because he thought he was not working hard enough to justify his existence.

Most enjoyable is the chapter where he gives out the secret of his success as the editor of a magazine which was no more than a few pages of community calendar and pictures of newly weds, to have been transformed into the most widely read magazine in India. His description of Bombay, its vibrant life, and his professional-cum-personal equation with Fatima Zakaria, his assistant-editor (who did not and could not write), but "without her," he says, "I could not have run the journal" (236).

His editor's page came to widely read, he was sought after by Chief Ministers of States and members of the central cabinet. Then:

"Success went to my head. I became a name-dropper. It was only my wife and daughter who brought me down a peg or two. But there were many more to inflate my ego. I began to think of the "*Illustrated Weekly*" as my child, that it would languish the day I left it. Such hubris can be fatal. My day of reckoning was not far off" (254).

And so he left Bombay to come home to Delhi, where he lives now - a living legend.

"Brutally honest," as his son Rahul describes him, Khushwant Singh does not spare anyone, not even himself, his wife and his loved ones. Of course, you will also read juicy gossip about the most prominent historical figures, e.g. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Maneka Gandhi, Biju Patnaik, BK Nehru, Lord Mountbatten and Lady Edwina, and many more.

Khushwant Singh has also shared some very painful intimate details of his life, e.g. when his son, Rahul, cut his hair. Khushwant Singh writes his reaction:

"I got a letter from my son Rahul, then on some *Reader's Digest* assignment in England, informing me that he had cut off his long hair. He held me responsible for his decision. I realised that he was right but, strangely enough, it wounded me ... Rahul made a very handsome Sikh in turban, without it, and his beard, and his moustaches trimmed he looked like a nondescript Maulvi. It took us some years to get accustomed to him in his new shape" (270-271).

Khushwant Singh pays a rich tribute to his father. He was in Bombay when he heard of his death:

"I was numbed. For a long time I sat still not knowing what to do... that night I got no sleep. I kept going over events in my father's life. A self-made man, a generous father who I had barely known as a person with human feelings. I knew full well that if it had not been for his constant support, I would never have been able to write a single book" (266).

Scores of women have come in and gone out of Khushwant Singh's life, some have stayed as friends for life, but no one appears to have stolen his heart, and he spends his sleepless nights (if he does every once in a while), it's not over women but his work, the deadlines he has to meet to "earn his scotch," as he says. The book is studded with stories of sex and scotch and his scholarship shines through every page when he reminisces over many decades of Indian history and the individuals who shaped it. His own reactions to some historical events as a journalist, and as a Member of Parliament are noteworthy. His voice in the parliament was like the groan of a wounded lion when he held Indira Gandhi responsible for the bloodshed of thousands of innocent pilgrims at the Golden Temple in the month of June 1984. Then there was dramatic move to return to his "Padma Bhushan" to Giani Zail Singh, the President of India. Khushwant Singh's speech in the parliament remains to be the best commentary on "Operation Bluestar."

Khushwant Singh also writes about Simba, as if he were a person, a member of the family (that he was). Simba was a pet, a dog that became a special member of the family, who could communicate with human beings as if he were more human than they. He obeyed his master, Khushwant Singh, who taught him human virtues, e.g. patience, endurance and a sense of humour too. Simba learnt all that very well, but when Simba died the family lost a friend who was never replaced.

"How can you replace a friend?" Asks Khushwant Singh. And the family has never, ever had another dog as a pet. There is something to be said about Khushwant Singh's loyalty to his friends.

Reading between the lines of over 400 pages of *Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography*, of Khushwant Singh, one gets to know the trials and triumphs of Khushwant Singh's life, one also gets to know (to some extent), Khushwant Singh, the man, a man of steel, a man with a strong super-ego, and a very tender heart.

This book is not just another book you buy in the market. This is a book you must read if you want to know about a man who has made huge difference in Sikh affairs, in world affairs, and who remains to be the most widely read author and who stirs up controversy because he asks the most difficult, unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable questions, e.g. "What exactly is death? I do not have a clue, except that I have dreaded it ever since becoming conscious of it. Basically, it is because I had no idea of where I will be after it takes place. The death of relatives yielded no answers. They simply dissolved into nothingness... only those who have experienced death are entitled to speak about it, I have not experienced it. As far as I am concerned I am willing to accept it as the final full-stop beyond which there is void that no one has been able to penetrate" (408-409).

Most touching is the last chapter, in which he says, "When I began this autobiography I believed it would be the last book I would write in my life, I was wrong." In the year 1999, Khushwant Singh's wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and the best he could do was to pay for her treatment with the most expensive drugs being used by the former US President, Ronald Reagan. Khushwant Singh writes, "It cost more than a precious paisa. I am more than happy to shell out the cash for somebody who has been with me more than sixty years of my life. But it is hard for me to sit all day watching a person who was so lively and full of zest for life become a non person... I was always certain she would outlast me by many years. I am no longer sure that she will. But I have a gut feeling that if she goes before me, I will put away my pen and write no more" (419).

I hope and pray that Khushwant Singh is wrong again, that he will write many more books to illuminate the literary world, despite the fact that his wife, Kaval is no more.



SRI HARMANDIR SAHIB: THE GOLDEN TEMPLE OF THE SIKHS

By Choor Singh

Published by Harpenden, Hertfordshire: European Institute of Sikh Studies

Pages: 155

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At first sight this book about the Golden Temple appears to be mis-titled. It seems to be a history and guide-book of Harmandir Sahib. Reading it, however, one discovers that it contains much more. Whereas there are only 43 pages giving a history and description of Harmandir Sahib, 74 pages deal with Operation Blue Star. If one thinks about it more carefully, the latter portion of the book becomes entirely relevant to the overall story of Harmandir Sahib. This latter portion is also very well told.

The Indian Government, and indeed all who are interested in the Sikhs, would do well to pay close attention to this part. This is in spite of the fact that the book has been written 15 years after Operation Blue Star. Bear in mind that it is written by one who has scaled the heights of the judiciary. Dr Choor Singh Sidhu is, after all, a retired judge of the Singapore Supreme Court. And take heed also of other Sikhs who are quoted at length on the subject of the Indian Army's assault in 1984 (men such as Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh). Their verdict is wholly damning of the incident. If people such as these are so strong in their condemnation one should take careful notice. Sikhs have been monstrously offended, and Sikhs certainly have not forgiven the Prime Minister and Government responsible for what can only be regarded as an outrage.

Choor Singh Sidhu brings to bear his considerable legal training on the subject, and coupled with his strong sense of anguish this part of the book makes powerful reading. It also contains an appendix dealing with Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, together with the famous Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Be warned. The Sikhs have neither forgotten nor forgiven. This incident took place in the grounds of the Golden Temple and the effect on the Sikhs' memory of Harmandir Sahib means that it is entirely relevant to the subject as a whole.

The attention paid to Operation Blue Star is preceded by a history of Sri Harmandir Sahib and a description of the various buildings which surround it. This part of the book is also very well told. Choor Singh Sidhu writes, in his Preface, that the book is intended for Sikhs outside India. For Sikhs of the diaspora it will indeed be a welcome addition to their reading. By those who live in India, however, it will also be consulted with great interest, and indeed by those who live in the Punjab. The effect is greatly enhanced by a series of full-page colour photographs showing each of the important places and people mentioned in the text.

I have only one criticism of the book, shared also by Dr I. J. Singh who has written the Foreword. Why must we always refer to Sri Harmandir Sahib as the Golden Temple? In a sense, the answer is obvious. That is the name by which it has come to be known by the outside world and, if the intention is to communicate with non-Sikhs, one has to use a name which is known. But is that really the case? If we make up our minds always to

refer to it as the Golden Gurdwara, and consistently use this term in all that is written about Harmandir Sahib, we shall gradually win this particular battle. The word 'temple' in the English language communicates something different from 'gurdwara', and in the Indian context the impression conveyed is plainly that of a Hindu religious building. It can, of course, be argued that to speakers of Punjabi or other North Indian languages, Sri Harmandir Sahib will also communicate the same impression. If Sikhs do not want to be confused with Hindus there are two terms which should surely be used. For those who speak Punjabi the term can be Darbar Sahib and for foreigners it can be the Golden Gurdwara.

