

Doyen of Indian Journalism

An interview with Sardar Khushwant Singh

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IT WAS NOT EASY TO GET Khushwant Singh to agree to a meeting. Perhaps my book reviews published in *The Sikh Review* helped. Whatever the reason, after a couple of telephone calls, he agreed to see me at his residence on the morning of Feb. 15.

He lives in an apartment complex across the street from Hotel Ambassador in Sujan Singh Park, New Delhi. From the outside, it is a majestic looking complex of apartment buildings. However, it is not all that well maintained from the inside. I made it to his door five minutes early for my 11 a.m. appointment.

The door, walls, and hallway wear an old look and are in need of paint. There are cobwebs in the corners. I did not have to wait long and was allowed in by a servant via a side door which led me to the backyard. The eighty-eight year “young” man was sprawling on a long easy chair like the Sphinx. I was expecting a well groomed lawn, decorated with flowery shrubs in British style. However, like the *sardar sahib* [Sikh gentleman] himself, everything looked aged and somewhat unkempt. Dressed in old crumpled clothes, worn out shoes and socks, the Sardar looked a little like a neglected widower.

As we started conversing, I realized that the old warrior is still young at heart and jovial as ever. He exuded warmth and affection and made me feel right at home. There was a healthy glow on his face and he looked much more handsome than he does on television. He is not the cranky old man - impatient, irritable, and snobbish - that I had imagined him to be. Rather, he turned out to be very amiable and easy to get along with. Then I started my interview.

Jagpal Singh Tiwana: You mention in your autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, that you were a Leftist in your early years at Lahore. What inspired you to embrace this ideology?

Khushwant Singh: When I was in England as a student, socialism was much talked about among us. We read and discussed Bertrand Russell and attended lectures by Harold J. Laski. I have not retained many socialistic ideas, but I am still an agnostic.

J.S.T.: You are a non-believer, yet you spent a night at Bangla Sahib gurdwara to seek the Guru's support during a difficult time in your personal life when your wife had threatened to leave you.

K.S.: This is one of those things - a contradiction. It was an emotional issue for me. I was born and raised in a Sikh family. I still keep my beard and turban and identify myself with the Sikh community.

J.S.T.: Some Sikhs say we are discriminated against in India. What do you think?

K.S.: No, not at all. They are making progress all over the country. They are in the mainstream of Indian life. They are now found in almost all political parties, even the R.S.S.

J.S.T.: No Sikh general has been appointed army chief. Harbakhsh's name was recommended by outgoing army chief Kumaramanglam, and approved by the Defence Committee, but [then prime minister] Indira Gandhi ignored the recommendations and appointed Manekshaw.

K.S.: They can't trust a non-Hindu to be the army chief, the most powerful wing of the defense forces, though Arjan Singh, Marshal of Air Force, and Dilbagh Singh had gone to the top in Indian Air Force. Maybe someone did in the Navy as well, I'm not sure.

J.S.T.: Sirdar Kapur Singh wrote in *Sachi Sakhi* [true biography] that what incensed him most was a letter issued by the state governor, Chandu Lal Trivedi, warning district authorities in the Punjab against 'criminal tendencies' of the Sikh people.

K.S.: I don't know if such a document exists. Chandu Lal Trivedi was in a responsible position. How could he give such instructions in writing? It could be all a figment of Kapur Singh's imagination. He was bitter because he was harassed and dismissed from the ICS.

J.S.T.: What do you think of R.S.S. chief Sudershan's statements, which Sikhs find highly offensive?

K.S.: R.S.S. is a communal organization and dangerous to the country's secular fabric. Look what they did to Muslims in Gujarat. However, they take a different approach with the Sikhs. During the 1984 Sikh *pogrom*, they did save many Sikh lives. R.S.S. volunteers participated during the tercentenary celebrations of the Khalsa in 1999. They consider the Khalsa to be a military wing of Hinduism and their savior.

J.S.T.: Sikhs assert that theirs is an independent sovereign religion, while you often club Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism with Hinduism?

K.S.: That is correct. The Sikhs' religious source is Hinduism. Sikhism is, by and large, a tradition developed within Hinduism. Guru Granth Sahib comments on Vedantic philosophy and certain concepts of Japji Sahib are traceable to the Upanishads.

J.S.T.: You sometimes write against the established Sikh tradition which hurts the sensitivity of Sikhs. You could be summoned to the Akal Takht for explanation.

K.S.: They don't have the guts to summon me. They only go after the weak and the timid. Why don't they summon Ranjit Singh who claims he is the real *jathedar* [high priest] of Akal Takht? Pashaura Singh talked to me after appearing before Akal Takht *jathedar*. I told him 'what is the point now? You should have contacted me earlier.' No scholar should be summoned to Akal Takht. It is a religious place, not a *kotwali* (police station).

J.S.T.: How do you view the controversy on the Dasam Granth?

K.S.: This area needs more research. No hasty conclusion should be drawn. I must say that I am not as familiar with it as I should be.

J.S.T.: Some say that Singh Sabha scholars asserted the independent identity of Sikhism and tried to cut all links with Hinduism.

K.S.: Partly true. They did not distort Sikh history; they only emphasized, sometimes too greatly, the differences between the new reform movement, i.e. Sikhism, and the old, traditional, and degenerated Hinduism. What they portray as unique to Sikhism, like unity of God, casteless society, etc. were also preached by other Vaishnava *bhaktas* [saints] of the time.

J.S.T.: Should a *mona* (non-turbaned) or *sahaj-dhari* [unorthodox] Sikh have the right to vote in S.G.P.C. elections?

K.S.: Why not? As long as someone declares he or she is a Sikh, that person is a Sikh. He or she should have a right to vote. *Sahaj-dharis* have been part of the Panth (community) since the very beginning. Now they say only *amrit-dhari* men can do *seva* at Harmandar Sahib, but not women, even if they are *amrit-dharis*. This is not congruent with the Gurus' teachings: *manus ki jaat sabey eko pehchaanbo* [all humans are equal regardless of caste or creed]. Every Sikh should be allowed to do *seva* [service], whether *amrit-dhari* or non-*amrit-dhari*.

J.S.T.: In your earlier works, you had surmised that Sikhism is a blend of Hinduism and Islamic Sufism. However, later, when Hew McLeod's works started appearing, you wrote in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that Sikhism is a tradition developed within Hinduism and an extension of the *bhakti* movement.

K.S.: Yes, McLeod's works did change my ideas on this issue. A scholar must keep an open mind. I, however, do not like his new book, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*. He has translated *rahits* [code of conduct documents] authored by many insignificant people. Who was this Chaupa Singh who gave *rahitnama* to the Sikhs? His *rahitnama* says ridiculous things like "how to urinate, where to cleanse oneself, never trust a woman, etc. A *Rahitnama* has to have the authority of the Guru. It is just like a *maulvi* [preacher] of that masjid [mosque] (pointing to the east) writing instructions in name of Muhammad.

J.S.T.: What do you think of McLeod's research? Sometimes his writings are called tendentious, even inspired by Christian missionaries out to damage Sikhism.

K.S.: That is nonsense. I believe he is an authentic scholar in search of original documents on Sikh history. He has raised many questions. The onus is on us to supply him with the facts. No, he is honest, if a skeptic historian.

J.S.T.: Some people discern a pro-Jat bias in your works. Someone on the Sikh Diaspora forum (Yahoo Groups) quoted you as saying, 'Sikhs were nothing before Jats became Sikhs.'

K.S.: I base my opinion on historical evidence. After Guru Gobind Singh's death, Sikh peasantry rose in arms under Banda Bahadur. Then Jats in the Sikh *misls* [armed groups] fought all through the 18th century to establish Khalsa *raj* [rule]. Out of the 12 Sikh *misls*, 9 were headed by Jat chiefs. In this struggle, they made tremendous sacrifices. If one generation was wiped out, the next generation took up

arms. Finally, they emerged victorious at the end of the century. Are Tiwanas Jats? Any relation with that Punjabi woman writer?

J.S.T.: Dalip Kaur Tiwana? No relationship with her, or with the Punjabi film director Harpal Tiwana. However, we were contemporaries at Mahendra College, Patiala. Dalip Kaur was four years senior to me, Harpal was my classmate. Yes, Tiwanas are Jats. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, former S.G.P.C. chief, is also a Tiwana.

K.S.: We had Muslim Tiwanas, Khizar Hayat and Ummar Hayat - big landlords - as our neighbors in Western Punjab. Khizar Hayat was chief minister of the Punjab when I was in Lahore before partition.

J.S.T.: What is your view on the Nanak Shahi calendar?

K.S.: I have no view on this issue . . . (pause) . . . What is wrong with the Christian calendar which is prevalent all over the world now?

J.S.T.: Which one of your books earned you the most royalty - your most *kamaoo putt* (highest-earning son)?"

K.S.: My autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, earned me the most money. It earned Rs. 26.5 lakh [1 lakh = 100,000] in the first six months. It is a very big figure for India. Possibly the biggest ever in Indian publishing. Thereafter, sales dropped as the pirated editions appeared in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Last year it got me only Rs. 1 lakh. The next highest royalty earned was from *The Company of Women*. Both the autobiography and this novel remained on the top of the best-sellers lists for over six months.

J.S.T.: Here is a book for you, *The Maritime Sikh Society: Origin and Growth*, from the Maritime Sikh Society in Halifax, Canada. It may not be of any use to you, but the book does have a few features of some value. It not only lists the addresses and accounts of all Sikhs settled there, but also their years of migration to the region and their places of origin in India or abroad. It covers the story of 174 Sikh refugees who were dropped ashore in Charlesville, Nova Scotia, by the Swedish ship, *Amelie*, one fine morning in July 1987. They were illegal immigrants; the Canadian police took them into custody. The notorious 'terrorist', Talvinder Singh Parmar, employed the famous immigration lawyer, Mendel Green, from Toronto. The Maritime Sikh Society took their case to court and got them released. Now, when the history of Sikh settlement in Canada is written, a reference to their entry into Canada often appears along with that of the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914.

K.S.: I do know of that incident. The Canadian high-commissioner had consulted me. He wanted an unbiased opinion. He said the government of India wanted them back and assured him of a fair treatment. I pleaded with him, 'For heaven's sake, do not hand over the boys to the G.O.I. They would be locked up in jails for all their lives without any trial. They want to settle in Canada. They have sold their lands in order to buy this passage to Canada. They could be very productive citizens. Give them a chance. They are not terrorists, but they will become terrorists if not accepted by Canada.

J.S.T.: Thank you! You were so right. All of them are now happily settled in Canada and occasionally visit us or call us to express their gratitude for the help they received in their time of need. One of them has settled in Halifax. . . . You've had a very fulfilling life. Any regrets about things you could not do or achieve?

K.S.: I have no regrets in life. I long to remain in *charhdi kalaa* (buoyant spirits) till it's my time to go.

J.S.T.: Would you like to be remembered as a historian, journalist, or fiction writer?

K.S.: Why not all three? I have worked hard on each (stated with pride and an endearing smile).

J.S.T.: In my humble view, your two volume classic, *A History of the Sikhs*, is a monumental work unmatched by any other Sikh historian. However, as a journalist and fiction writer you have several competitors. . . . Any message for Sikhs abroad?

K.S.: *Chardi Kalaa*. Keep your spirits high. And don't fight in gurdwaras."

