

For Those with Feet of Clay@

A short Critique of Khushwant Singh

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@This was written in Dec. 2001, well before *The Sikh Review's* Special Issue (February 2003) "The Best of Khushwant Singh".

Khushwant Singh is a celebrated writer with an enviable penchant for making *news and inciting controversy*. Some hullabaloo, I believe, is like spicing in food. It is always welcome and arouses and enlivens the mind by fostering debate, just as spicing excites the palate. Spicing in food, however, should be something like the musical instruments at a chamber music concert where a discerning ear can follow each instrument and its intricate patterns. It should not become like the throb of heavy metal that blows the ear as well as the mind. (But that is my preference.)

I feel similarly about cultured controversy. It is in debate and discussion that we define our goals, sharpen our focus and hone our skills. Hence the matter of Khushwant Singh and others with similar talents for thriving in stormy seas.

Khushwant has claimed, and not for the first time, that Sikhism is a reform movement within Hinduism. At times, he has also claimed Sikhism to be syncretic religion combining the best of Hinduism and Islamic Sufism. He is, of course not the first person to make such claims. Many Hindus from Dayanand, who lived over a hundred years ago, to contemporary writers like Bhai Mahavir and P.K. Nijhawan insist stridently that Sikhism is a sect or offshoot of Hinduism. The Qadiani Muslims continue to insist that Sikhism is a restatement of Islam and that Guru Nanak was a Muslim. Many scholars, such as Kapur Singh and Daljeet Singh have refuted such formulations with enviable logic and penache. **I, too, have added my two-cents to why both positions are false and Sikhism is a unique, revealed religion with its own worldview. But the uniqueness of Sikhism is not the question here. Nor I am going to undertake a defense of Khushwant. Heaven known he can do it more effectively himself.**

Particularly at this time Khushwant's opinion seems to have incensed many Sikhs. The interesting thing is that the criticism and anger are well based and appropriately directed. Young Sikhs in the diaspora are less forgiving of the mental gymnastics of Khushwant and particularly of his lifestyle, which they suspect does not hew to what a Sikh's code of conduct ought to be. It becomes difficult for young Sikhs in the diaspora to accept Khushwant Singh as a spokesman for Sikhism.

Khushwant, of course, is not the only one to be so harshly judged and found wanting. Young Sikhs want their role models to be model Sikhs. Theoretically, I can't really argue with such an expectation.

Of course, people like Khushwant have been on the public stage so long and because they also have some undeniable talent, they have become iconic figures. If there are some who focus on their antics and inconsistencies in life or work, there are others who act truly as acolytes and are appalled that their heroes are not heroes to all.

I wonder though how realistic either position is.

Some years ago, when my interest in Sikhism first awakened, I anxiously looked for literature on Sikhism that was also well written in readable English. That is when I came across Khushwant Singh's treatment of Sikh history. I also read some of McLeod's early works. And then I moved on to Teja Singh, Puran Singh, Harbans Singh and Kapur Singh. (I discovered Bhai Vir Singh and Bhai Kahn Singh in Punjabi sometime later.)

Even though I explored most, if not all, of the available English renderings of *gurbani* and Guru Granth, I have retained considerable admiration for the few translations by Khushwant Singh and Kapur Singh. As I further delved into Sikhism I also discovered many disagreements with the books and the authors that had earlier shaped my reading habits and me. **One cannot always remain an unquestioning admirer and, if one does, it might possibly indicate lack of critical thinking or a fateful lag in the development of a personal viewpoint. Occasional disagreements do not lessen the debt.**

That is why I have to admit that the writers noted above contributed significantly towards my discovery of the magic and the mystery of Sikhism. In time, other authors have joined their company in my thinking.

In time I also discovered that these people need not be icons or models of Sikhism. In fact they need not even be Sikh, and some, like Hew McLeod, Bertrand Russell or Paul Tillich, are clearly not. To look for perfection in lifestyle and total agreement in ideas is to invite disappointment and is also counterproductive. Even the best minds are shaped by the culture in which they function, none is entirely free of bias and there are no lenses that do not distort, even if involuntarily and minimally.

The much admired Bhai Vir Singh once offered an opinion that it was inappropriate to include a woman as one of the five chosen to initiate others into the fraternity of the Khalsa. Bhai Kahn Singh is reputed to have written an article that was construed as supportive of the claims of some people that Baba Ajaypal Singh was the manifestation of Guru Gobind Singh. There was much hue and cry. And to his credit, Kahn Singh quickly amended and clarified his statement. Such lapses in judgment, minor or otherwise, have to be judged in the context of their time and circumstance.

I have to admit that I have genuine liking for Khushwant Singh's early Sikh history but not for his treatment of the post-independence period. Similarly, I like Patwant Singh's esthetically excellent work on the Golden Temple but wish that he had not neglected the

destruction of Akal Takht by the Indian Army in 1984. (He has more than corrected this oversight in several subsequent writings.)

Khushwant Singh, or for that matter any other writer, need not be an ideal Sikh. The writings on Sikhism that served a purpose in my life once need not have the same function now. **I can still admire Khushwant's principled stand against the Indian government's genocide of the Sikhs in the 1980's. Yet I can also forcefully disagree with his characterization of Sikhism as a sect of Hinduism.** I can also find his loyalty to the house of Indira Gandhi painful.

Similarly, I find much to admire in McLeod's emphasis on using original sources for research in Sikhism and in his clear support for *keshadhari* and *amritdhari* Sikhs to be able to serve fully in Canadian society, including the armed services and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Yet I can disagree with him on his proclivity to dismiss the unwritten Sikh tradition; it is undocumented but not necessarily untrue, unreliable or invalid invention.

Not that I have any first hand knowledge of it, but I can overlook the purported lifestyle of Khushwant much as I can overlook the fact that Kapur Singh enjoyed his one drink every evening. Kapur Singh's legacy is not that one drink but the fact that he was a truly original mind in his analysis of Sikh teaching and tradition. His inimitable style, the wealth of his writing and the breadth of his vision, when added to his command of both Western and eastern philosophies, have left us a rich trove on Sikhism that will not be easily matched. Khushwant's attachment to Sikhism may be deep but it is perhaps not what he likes to flaunt.

But we humans all come with weaknesses and biases. No man or woman is complete or perfect; also no man or woman is entirely without merit. And these remain perhaps the first lessons of Sikhism. In disagreeing with a man we need not become disagreeable. In condemning his work we must not condemn the person.

The problem with icons is not much different from that in the truism that all children want their parents to be perfect. It often takes a lifetime to realize that they rarely are, yet we can honor them, love them and learn from them.

This is in defense of all of us who have 'feet of clay'.

