

KHUSHWANT SINGH'S VIEW ON SIKH RELIGION

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Khushwant Singh was one of the great and extraordinary novelist in Indian English Fiction. In his novels he gave more importance to be the Sikh religion, God, culture, people and tradition. Among his novels *History of Sikh* was written before the creation of the Punjabi speaking state in 1966. In the 1960s, the story of the Sikhs from the time of Guru Nanak to the fall of the Kingdom of Lahore in 1849 was the story of the rise, fulfilment and collapse of Punjab Nationalism. Guru Nanak and his successors promoted the spirit of approachment between Hindus and Muslims of the Punjab, speaking the language of the people. Though Guru Nanak did not have a very large following, a considerable number of people belonging to other communities paid homage to the ideal of there is no Hindu; there is no Musalman. And this ideal gave birth to Punjabi consciousness and Punjabi nationalism. It is difficult to think of any empirical evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in support of this hypothesis.

In fact Khushwant Singh tells us that Guru Nanak founded a new religion and by the beginning of the seventeenth century the Sikhs had become conscious of the fact that they were now neither Hindus nor Muslims but formed a third community of their own. The call to arms during the seventeenth century was hardly conducive to rapprochement with either Mughal state or its Hindu and Muslim supporters. Khushwant Singh's regret that Banda Bahadur's bid for power was a setback to the movement to infuse the sentiment of Punjabi nationalist in the masses is misplaced. He does not cite any evidence in support of this supposed movement. Ranjit Singh nurtured the consciousness of regional nationalism with his respect for other faiths and his court reflecting the secular pattern of his state. His Prime minister was a Dogra, his foreign minister was a Muslim and his Finance Minister was a Brahmin. Muslim artillery generals and influential Muslims mingled with Sikh Sardars and Hindus. Ranjit Singh's attitudes won the loyalty of his subjects. The resurgent nationalism became a powerful weapon of Punjabi imperialism. Here for the first time Khushwant Singh talks of a politico administrative framework in which Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims could operate in the interest of the state as well as their own. But even here he ignores the late eighteenth century Sikh chiefs who too had employed

Hindus and Muslims in their service. We know that Punjabi statement and consciousness had begun to appear in the late eighteenth century to gain greater momentum in the early nineteenth century. In other words, consciousness of Punjabi identity was largely a product of the period of Sikh rule. Khushwant Singh projects this situation backwards, unconsciously placing the cart before the horse.

Khushwant Singh tells that nationalist movement began after Ranjit Singh's death and finally collapsed in a clash of arms with the British in 1848-49. However the *Var of Shah Muhammed*, written after the first Anglo-Sikh war, gives the trenchant expression to Punjabi patriotism. A Muslim artillery General is known to have fought in the last battle of the second Anglo-Sikh war in 1848-49. Khushwant Singh chose to use the term Punjabi nationalism without trying to explain what he means by it, and without making any attempt to grapple with the rise of the consciousness of Punjabi regional identity. In his summing up of Sikh history in the present edition he does not talk of Punjabi nationalism and looks upon the forty years of Ranjit Singh's as the golden age of Sikh political achievement.

The period of colonial rule was seen by Khushwant Singh as the Sikh struggle for survival as a separate community. Within the first two centuries of their history the Sikhs had evolved a faith, outlook and way of life which gave them a semblance of nationhood. Their resistance to British expansionism and Muslim domination was inspired by the ideal of national survival which remained operative after Independence. The British started recruiting the Sikhs to the British Indian army, cautiously before 1857 and as a matter of deliberate policy afterwards, which promoted separate Sikh identity. The activities of Christian mission proselytization by the Arya Samaj, and introduction of the rational thought of the West obliged the Sikhs to redefine their faith and to bring about social reform. When the Arya Samajists claimed that Sikhism was a branch of Hinduism, the Sikhs insisted that they were a distinct and separate community.

Sikh politics till the first world war was marked generally by cooperation with the British. After the war, three important parties arose among the Sikhs: the Marxists, the Nationalist and the Akalis. All of them were opposed to the British. The Akalis turned out to be the

most important. Like the Chief Khalsa Diwan they too fought for reservations and weight age in constitutional politics and unlike the Chief Khalsa Diwan, they fought for the control for Gurudwaras, which alienated them from both Hindus and Muslims. Whether the Sikhs were a separate people or a branch of the Hindu social system remained an issue of debate even after the Sikh Gurudwaras Act. The Shironmani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee became a sort of parliament of the Sikhs, and the Shironmani Akali Dal became it a army. The control of the SGPC, a government within the government, became the focal point of Sikh politics. The award given by Ramsay MacDonald was a bitter blow to the Sikhs. It gave the Muslims a permanent communal majority in the Punjab. After the Pakistan resolution of 1940, the alternatives before the Sikhs were to align with the Congress for resisting the formation of Pakistan or to strive for a state of their own. Disappointed with the Congress, the Akali leaders toyed with the idea of a Sikh state but finally settled for the partition of their province to escape Muslim domination..Khushwant Singh's hypothesis of Sikh identity as the basis of Sikh politics under colonial rule is more tenable than his hypothesis of Punjabi nationalism before 1849.

The scope of Khushwant Singh's History is much wider than the exposition of Punjabi nationalism and Sikh identity. But most of the time he relates facts, and even views, coming from his sources. Their accuracy or inaccuracy is in a sense accidental. For example, when he says that Banda Bahadur abolished the zamindari system he repeats Ganda Singh, not bothering to know that Ganda Singh had cited no evidence in support of his statement. A good example of Khushwant Singh's in

difference to factual accuracy is his explanation and definition of Punjab. He talks of the Sapta Sindhva, the land of seven seas, of the Aryans and the Hafta Hindva of the Persians. After the seventh river, the Saraswati, dried up, people began to exclude the Indus from the count (since it marked only the western boundary of the province) and renamed it after to remaining five rivers as Pentapotamia or the pan-jab, the land of five waters. All this is little more than a conjecture based on common sense. Khushwant Singh goes on to add that Madra Desha, the land of the madras, was named after Madri, the mother of the Pandavas. Hereeven common sense is not at work. Both Madra and Madri, the name of the country and the princess, were derived from the name of the people called madras.

Khushwant Singh was not a professional historian but he was a reputable writer. A reader attracted by his literary reputation will not be disappointed with his books: they are eminently readable. His narrative skill are engaging. He cover the entire range of Sikh history- which can be one more attraction for the general reader.

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