

Khuswant Singh: The Absolute Secularist

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Abstract: The image of Khushwant Singh comes into relief through the thirty-three brief chapters of his latest work, *Absolute Khushwant* (2010), inter alia, is that of a confirmed and diehard secularist marked by the typical Punjabi spirit of *Chardi Kala*—never say die. But Singh is a whole man who has lived a full life with courage and conviction, never daunted by setbacks or disappointments. Like a typical Sikh, he has fought through his life, neither tempering nor compromising even when faced with upsetting odds. As in his earlier works—fiction, non-fiction, or history—in this rather tenuous work of reminiscence, too, he never minces words or pulls his punches.

Keywords: Khushwant Singh, Communalism, Secularism.

Secularism is one of the so many subjects on which Khushwant Singh, India's grand old man of letters, reminisces and comments. He tells us about his life, his love and his work. He writes on happiness, religion, honesty and what not, in the book. He writes about his successes and confesses his failures, tells us about his strengths and weaknesses and the ups and downs of his life. He also lets us in on the secrets of his health and longevity. He also reveals his worst fears and tells us about what he holds dear. There is hardly a subject that he does not touch upon—sex, marriage, religion and death. As he does so, he also refers to people whom he admires and also those whom he detests. *Absolute Khushwant*, in the ultimate analysis, may be said to be a collection of candid essays that may be read with the fluency of a piece of conversation. It is a veritable tell-all. The subtitle makes it all clear—"The Low Down on Life, Death and Most Things in Between". As one reads on one finds that he is equally frank about his distress at religious fundamentalism and his admiration of Sikhism and the scriptures of all religions notwithstanding his agnosticism. *Absolute Khushwant* is unmistakably autobiographical, presenting a profile of the remarkable man that is Khushwant Singh.

Khushwant Singh's secularism derives primarily from his agnosticism. He is a secularist by conviction and not impelled by any convenience or expedience. It is not a matter of politics or diplomacy for him, but one of principle and ideology. In this sense of secularism, we find him in the same fraternity as Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. But there is also a basic difference between them. Though an agnostic, Khushwant Singh is deeply interested in religion—Sikhism, Islam, Jainism, Christianity and so on. Nehru by contrast, had precising little to do with any religion or scriptures. He never wrote about professing or practising any religion in particular. But Khushwant Singh in the chapter "*On Religion*" observes, "If I had to choose a religion to follow, it would be Jainism" (p-153). He goes on to explain his preference for Jainism, "It comes closest to agnosticism and the code of ethics to which as a rationalist, I subscribe" (p-153). Though not believing in the dogma of Sikhism,

culturally he was no less a Sikh than any practising Sikh. A secularist par excellence, he is a perfect Sikh as well as far as its cultural and moral heritage is concerned. This is evident from the fact that his magnum opus is the classic *A History of the Sikh* in two volumes. This is further confirmed by the fact that he surrendered his *Padma Bhushan* after the massacre of Sikhs in the 1984 riots in Delhi and elsewhere in the country. This solidarity and sympathy with Sikhs does not conflict with his secularism. If he condemned the killing of Sikhs, he also condemned other instances of killing incited by religious fanaticism. His condemnation of religious fundamentalism comes out loud and clear irrespective of who the victims may be. Though a Sikh, he categorically condemned Bhindranwale's demand for a separate Khalistan. It was not an easy stand to take. This led to his name being included in the hit list of the Khalistanis. Without high-level security provided to him, he could have long been a deadman. He has never been daunted by anything that comes in the way of his secular convictions. That he is indeed a man of courage to take on the fundooos—whoever they may be—shows that he has always been ready to die a martyr to the cause of secularism. There is nothing to deter him from saying anything “with malice towards one and all”. This again is probably what makes him say “Nobody has invented a condom for the pen”(p-28).

But regrettably his secular stance often seems to be at the cost of the Hindus. He condemns the Hindu fundamentalists, conveniently ignoring the fundamentalism of other shades and colours. There is no doubt about the fact that fundamentalism of all denominations is atavistic and repugnant to the modern scientific spirit. Religious fundamentalism and spiritual emancipation are mutually exclusive. They are absolutely irreconcilable. So when Khushwant Singh condemns fundamentalism, it is always a condemnation of all forms of fundamentalism preached and practised by the followers of any religion. He is eloquent in his condemnation of Hindu fundamentalism, but seems to maintain a dubious silence over the rabid fundamentalism practised by others. While condemning Hindu fundamentalism, one has to bear in mind the unpalatable fact that it is often a reaction to provocation given by believers in other religions. His condemnation of terrorism sounds somewhat muted in comparison with his condemnation of the Delhi and Gujarat riots. We must not forget that the success of secularism depends on inter communal consensus. Just as it is next to impossible to remain honest in the community of the corrupt, similarly it is difficult to remain secular in a context of rabid communal and religious fundamentalism and exclusiveness. Everyone has to realize that scientific secularism is the only mantra for the survival of human civilization and culture. Religion should be an essentially a private and social affair. Like most right-thinking men, everyone has to realize that mixing religion with politics can have disastrous consequences, because when it comes to actual practice religion has hardly anything to do with God. It is reduced to the level of a mere ism. And the followers of one ism are after the heads of the followers of other isms. Multiplicity and diversity of religions often make people think that there are as many

Gods as there are religions. History bears witness to the fact that nothing has caused so much spilling of human blood as religion. Roman Catholics have killed Protestants; Protestants have killed Roman Catholics; Muslims have killed Christians and Christians have killed Muslims; Hindus have killed Muslims as Muslims have killed Hindus, Hindus have killed Sikhs and Sikhs have killed Hindus. Are religions there to kill fellow human beings or to serve them? No man should think himself mightier than the Almighty. If there is anything said or done that is thought to be a blasphemy or a sacrilege, who should punish the culprit? Should it be man or God Himself? If God who is everybody's God is insulted, God Himself should take care of the situation. He should punish the sinner. It is not for man to be judging others. Judgment belongs to God. Ours is to love and die for our love. Ours is not to hurt and kill. This is the spiritual line of thought underlying secularism.

But the other line is the intellectual and philosophical one. If you are really not sure about the existence of God, how can you be a believer? And if you are not a believer in God or any other form of supernatural or transcendental authority, you cannot have a religion. And if you do not have a religion or substitute religion, the only option remaining is secularism. Secularism is not an ideology but an idea, an idealism. To be secular is to adopt the scientific point of view with regard to religion and God. To be secular is to be intellectually humble and tolerant. Agnosticism which lies at the bottom of secularism is very close to what Rama krishna Paramhansa says in the context of God and belief in God—"Joto mot, toto poth" (as many views, so many avenues). A very apt equivalent to this view may be found in the Jaini philosophical dictum of "*Syadvad*" (or philosophical relativism). What Quintus Aurelius Symmachus said at his trial for heresy in the court of Bishop Ambrose of Milan is very pertinent to the whole rationale of agnosticism or any form of secularism deriving from it: "the heart of so great a mystery (that is the mystery of God) cannot be reached by one road only" (R.Digest;p-30) But in India secularism has virtually lost its philosophical reference and acquired a somewhat political and rather politic reference. For the politicians of India and for most laymen, secularism is more religious than a-religious. It is not religion-neutral rather but accepting and accommodative of all religions. It is not quite "Dharma nirapeksha" in the true sense of the term but "sarvadharmasambhava" secularism in the western and right-sense of the term is to ensure that politics is not mixed with or mixed up with religion. Even the maker of Pakistan Md. Ali Jinnah had once warned against such mixture leading to disastrous consequences. Though a leader of a communal party and founder of a theocratic state, he was a perfect secularist at heart and hated politics that allied itself with religion. India is a secular state today. Its secularism is enshrined in its constitution itself. But what passes as secularism in this country is only a travesty of secularism as it should be really interpreted. Kushwant Singh comes down like a ton of bricks on this kind of secularism. He makes his position clear vis-à-vis secularism when he says:

One thing that bothers me though is that even though we call ourselves a secular democracy, the state involves itself in religious matters. I'm

referring to the way hectares of forest land were given to the Amarnath Shrine Board, creating total chaos and anarchy in the state of J&K. (K. Singh p.134-35)

As far as the state is concerned, it should be hands off religion. But EM Forster has perceived a kind of muddle in the Indian situation and this muddle can be traced to the intellectual fuddle of which the Indian mind is often a victim. Children in our educational institutions are told and taught about secularism day in and day out. Yet come admission time, they or their guardians are required to mention their religions and castes in their applications. Why should caste and religion have any relevance or use in a secular democracy? Isn't it a paradox to preach secularism and practice communalism and castism. For statistical reasons, information on caste and religion is undoubtedly necessary. But for that the ten-yearly censuses are enough. In our country, the spirit of secularism is nullified every day. We may not be aware of it, but all this amounts to hypocrisy and self-deception. Similarly, any talk of 'majority' and 'minority' is a repudiation of the principle of secularism. In fact, these words are misnomers in a secular democracy. It is enough that we are Indians. Why should we have a supernumerary identity that smacks of latent communalism? In a secular state there may be linguistic 'majority' and 'minority' but talking of religious 'majority' or 'minority' is repugnant to the whole spirit of our constitution which may be detrimental to our national integration, India is already teeming with diversity and multiplicity. Why add to them? Why do to our selves what the Britishers had done to us? Why divide to misrule? Let us not have too many identities. Multiplicities of identity put the axe right at the root of our national integrity. Khushwant Singh's perception of secularism is that religions should be a matter of personal persuasion and social interaction which should find no place in politics or in any public affair. On this issue he seems to see eye to eye with Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru when he says about him: He was an agnostic, and firmly believed that religion played a very negative role in Indian society(pp-134-35).

It was secularism, again, that drew Singh close to Manzur Qadir, his Lahore friend who went on to become the Chief Justice of Pakistan. It shows that even in a theocratic state there may be some who are secular. In fact, Md Ali Jinnah himself was secular; turning communal was only a political compulsion for him. A man like him could not have a political constituency for himself without aligning himself with his community. In a similar way, though an agnostic and secular by conviction, Khushwant Singh does not seem to be completely capable of weaning himself from his racial, linguistic and communal identity. He may not be a Sikh by religion, but he is a Sikh all the same. That is one of the reasons why he reacted so strongly to the storming of the Golden Temple in Operation Blue Star in 1984. Another instance of his loyalty to his Sikh identity is his writing of *The History of the Sikhs*. All this goes to prove that one can preserve one's racial and cultural identity without being communal and in spite of being secular. Khushwant Singh's secular credentials can never be doubted. He has gone on record several times as also in *Absolute Khushwant* that he is categorically against the fundoods; and whenever the situation demanded he took up cudgels in defense of the victims of

communal intolerance and violence. As he says himself :

In 1999, when the Christian missionary Graham Staines was brutally burned to death while he slept in his car with his two little sons. I wrote against the violent attacks against Christians in Kandhamal two years ago. (p-130).

He traces the roots of the present state of communalism in this country to the progressively growing intolerance in our country. To quote him again, "We have no compassion or understanding for those who are different from us" (p-131). This is true not only of Hindus against Muslims, or Muslims against Hindu, but also of Hindus against Hindus and Muslims against Muslims. It is no secret that the vegetarian Hindus in certain parts of India impose their vegetarian ways on non-vegetarians. They do not allow their tenants to eat non-vegetarian food on their premises. So Khushwant Singh's perception of the real cause of growing communalism in India is quite right. The steady growth of communalism can also be accountable to the Government itself prompting it. Be it the Central Government or the State Government, they all seem afraid to govern. The policy of appeasement of the so called 'minorities' is transparently noticeably. If the government gives the impression of being timid in practising secularism it bodes ill for the nation. It undercuts our very sovereignty. It is a standing shame for India that the government does not even have the guts to provide diplomatic asylum to Taslima Nasreen, not to talk of granting her citizenship. The obvious difficulty for the government is that it feels that it will lose Muslim votes by offending the Muslims in doing right to the lady in distress. Similarly, the government is afraid of bringing the terrorists to book because it thinks if will antagonise the Muslims. Such pusillanimity amounts to failure in doing what a government is expected to do. All this goes against the grain of secularism. Secularism should not be communal in the sense that it must not apply only to the so-called 'majority' in the country, but equally to the so-called 'minorities' as well. If the Hindus are required to be secular then all the communities in the country must be secular. If the VHP and Bajrang Dal deserve to be banned on communal grounds so should also be the Indian Muslim League. Without an impartial and uniform application of the principles of secularism to one and all, it can never be effective. On the contrary, it may prove to be counter-productive. It is high time that the country awoke to the urgent need to practise genuine secularism and eschew pseudo-secularism. Let the country prove Khushwant Singh wrong when he says; quoting an Urdu couplet:

Kya poochho ho haal merey karobaar ka, Aaeeney bechta hoo andho ke sheher mein. (You ask me about my business. I sell mirrors in a city of the blind). (p.189)

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