CHAPTER IV

NON-FICTION

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.
(Pope 362-63)

For more than four decades, Khushwant Singh has been writing on almost all issues which affect or attract the contemporary society. Of the subjects of his choice, the Sikh history, politics, religion and general matters like sex, corruption, prohibition, bride burning and marriage are prominent in his writings.

Though at one stage he says that "writing on the Sikhs was a calculated move" in a highly competitive field, later it has given him a sense of fulfilment: "I had justified my existence and ended my Sikh history with the Latin Opus Exegii -- my life's work is done" ("Compulsions to Write 186). This kind of identification of his existence with a particular writing is quite significant. It suggests the extreme psychological involvement of the creator with his creative work. It is all the more important in the case of Khushwant Singh because it brings to light his complete identification with the Sikh community and Sikh consciousness.
Khushwant Singh's *The History of the Sikhs* in two volumes (1469-1839 and 1839-1988) is the first attempt on a comprehensive scale,

... to tell the story of the Sikhs from their inception to the present day. It is based on the study of original documents in Gurmukhi, Persian and English available in the archives and libraries of India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. It also gives an account of the Sikh communities scattered in different parts of the world -- Great Britain, the United States, Canada, China, Malaya States, Burma, and South and East Africa -- and of the way they are facing the challenge of modern times in alien surroundings. (Preface. *The History of the Sikhs* 1: vii)

The story of the Sikhs begins in the later part of the fifteenth century with Guru Nanak initiating a religious movement. This religious movement was preaching the unity of Hinduism and Islam -- the two faiths practised in the Punjab. Soon it began to develop an identity of its own and in due course it grew into a faith. This had some resemblance to Hinduism and to Islam and yet had some unique features of its own.
By the beginning of the seventeenth century the movement resulted in the formation of a third religious community consisting of the disciples or Sikhas of Nanak. Its mysticism found expression in the anthology of their sacred writings -- The Adi Granth. It consisted of the writings of the Sikh gurus as well as of Hindu and Muslim saints. The next hundred years witnessed the growth of a political movement alongside the religion. It culminated in the call to arms by the later guru, Gobind Singh. Then under the leadership of Banda, the peasants of the Punjab defied the authority of Mughal governors; and they kept the imperial forces at bay for seven years. Though Banda and his followers were ruthlessly killed, the spark of rebellion that they had lighted, burst into flames time and again in different parts of the province. The movement touched its peak with the liberation of Lahore and the setting up of the first Independent kingdom under Ranjit Singh in 1799. Under Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs spearheaded the nationalist movement which had gathered the parent communities -- the Hindus and the Muslims within its fold.

The second volume takes up the narrative from the death of Ranjit Singh and brings it to the present times. The nationalist movement having run its course began to collapse in a clash of arms with the British in 1848-49. It recounts
how the Sikhs, who, in a couple of centuries later had evolved a faith, an outlook, and a way of life that gave them a semblance of nationhood. It also gives an account of how they had to fight against the forces of dissolution in order to preserve their identity. It deals with the religious, political and social movements born out of the impact of the British rule, the fate of the Sikhs in the Partition of their homeland in 1947 and the great exodus from Pakistan. It ends with the resettlement of the Sikhs in independent India and the establishment of a Punjabi-speaking state in the Indian union. The book concludes with the recent troubled events leading upto Operation Bluestar and its tragic aftermath.

It is evident that this work of Khushwant Singh is the true saga of a great people; yet the principal feeling underlying this comprehensive work, according to Nigel Cameron -- in his review in Eastern Horizon (May 1967) -- is "tragedy". All through the five centuries of history dealt with in the 2 volumes the Sikhs continue to struggle for survival as a separate community. It is, in a way, a tragedy for the founder of the movement, Guru Nanak, who actually wanted to unite Hinduism and Islam. But his aim misfired and resulted in the formation of a new faith, namely, Sikhism. Furthermore, ironically enough, the followers of Guru Nanak,
in the process of trying to make the Hindus and the Muslims shed their separate identities in order to become one had themselves ended up with a new and separate identity. It becomes all the more interesting that the Sikhs would thereafter make no compromise whatsoever on this. Even today they are cautious not to get absorbed into Hinduism. Khushwant Singh himself confirms this fear: "... the growing tendency to abandon forms and symbols, has increased the tempo of Sikh merger into Hinduism. If the present pace of amalgamation continues, there is little doubt that before the century has run its course Sikh religion will have become a branch of Hinduism and the Sikhs a part of the Hindu social system." (The Sikhs 185)

It is interesting to observe that Khushwant Singh, in spite of his cosmopolitan outlook on various issues, is keen on maintaining this separate identity. The following extract from Khushwant Singh's letter to the researcher explains why he prefers to have kesh and the beard:

... without kesh and beard you cannot have the sense of belonging. For me it is a social and psychological necessity. (Khushwant Singh's Letter dt.7.1.95)

Such a craving for separate identity was very much in existence among the Sikhs as early as even 1849 when the
Sikhs were recruited for the British army. The memo that Brigadier Hodgson drew up on the subject became a sort of magna carta for Sikh recruitment:

The paol, or religious pledges of Sikh fraternity, should on no account be interfered with. The Sikh should be permitted to wear his beard, and the hair of his head gathered up, as enjoined by his religion. (The History of Sikhs 2: 112)

It is to be noted that the same trend continues even today, both in India and abroad. Recently in Canada the Sikhs, as reported in Indian Express, have won through a court order the right to wear the turban:

Calgary: The Federal Court of Appeal in Calgary has rejected an appeal against the lower court's decision to allow Sikhs to wear turbans as members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) ("Sikhs retain right to Wear Turban" 7)

Through a different outward appearance the Sikhs establish a separate physical identity. However, this in some way, indirectly alienates them from others while paving the way for others to alienate them.
There is no doubt that Ranjit Singh is Khushwant Singh's hero; he is the ideal man of action and vision. Yet Khushwant Singh does not unduly glorify him. Shahane's observation in this context is worth quoting:

Singh's scholarly and comprehensive presentation of the long and chequered history of the Sikhs is written with passion and power and is characterized by objectivity, equipoise, and fidelity to truth. Only a liberal Sikh could have written this history with such sympathy and inward understanding. (Khushwant Singh 140)

One cannot deny the fact that time and again Khushwant Singh the artist excels in the presentation of the history of the Sikhs. In his description of Ranjit Singh, the lion of the Punjab he refers to him as an able and judicious administrator. One admires Ranjit Singh for having overcome the princely temptation of fostering a personality cult.

In spite of the atrocities of the Muslim invaders, Ranjit showed remarkable religious tolerance and generosity towards the Muslims. He paid great respect to the institutions of other communities and participated freely in their religious festivals. He celebrated Dussehra and Diwali.
along with the Hindus:

On Holi, he went among the throngs squirting coloured water and powder and making merry, often in a manner quite unbecoming to a monarch. (The History of the Sikhs 1: 204)

He paid homage at the tombs of the Muslim divines. Khushwant Singh makes his hero Ranjit Singh a symbol for simplicity, efficiency and justice in administration, tolerance and generosity in religious matters. This, he believes, was the need of the past era and continues to be the need of the present Indian society. It could be argued -- perhaps convincingly -- that Khushwant Singh is biased. But one should accept the fact that only a Sikh could have given such minute details with such a passion. It is not just a history full of facts and figures but the life story of a clan. A closer analysis of his attitude reveals the fact that he has twin identity -- the Sikh and the Indian. So, naturally, one can notice in him the oscillation between these two points.

When the interest of the Sikhs was involved in any issue, the history of the Sikhs tells us, that the Sikhs took decisions to safeguard their interests. Nothing else mattered to them. For instance, the Sikhs gave only lukewarm support to the Indian risings against the British
power in 1857. For, they were great beneficiaries of British regime. Moreover, the Sikhs did not want the revival of either Mughal rule or of Maratha power. So, they became loyal allies of the British in suppressing the mutiny of 1857 and for that they were amply rewarded by the British administration.

What most of the Indian historians call the First War of Independence in 1857, the British historians like Macaulay call "The Mutiny of Sepoys" because of the soldiers' refusal to use the cartridges which contain fat of either of cow or pig. But Khushwant Singh looks at it from a Sikh perspective.

Sikhs did not join the uprising of 1857. None of them regarded it as a war of Independence as some Indian historians have tried to make it appear. . . . (My Bleeding Punjab 34)

The Sikh did not make common cause with the so-called Hindustanees (U.P.Bihari and Bengali Soldiers of the company), because it was these mercenaries that the British had used to destroy the Sikh Kingdom in 1849. But, the Sikhs were subjected to indignities by the British after the World War I and in the Jallianwala massacre a large number of Sikhs were killed by the gunfire ordered by General Dyer.
Then the Sikh enthusiasm to cooperate with the British rapidly declined and the Sikhs joined the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi.

Again, the Partition of India dealt a severe blow to the Sikhs. They lost for ever their rich agricultural land, major trades and numerous religious shrines to Pakistan. The Partition line drawn by the British divided the Sikh community into two and they became the worst affected and they suffered heavily at the hands of Muslims. And the problem of resettlement and preservation of Sikh culture and its identity in the post-Partition India, disturbed many Sikhs. Khushwant Singh, too shares this fear:

The overwhelming majority of the population (85 per cent) which subscribed to one or other form of Hinduism felt that, with political Independence, the time had come to re-assert its religious and cultural identity. India's new rulers who chose to make it a secular state (which in Indian nomenclature does not mean non-religious but one which accords equal respect to all religions) nevertheless fully supported the renaissance of Hinduism. (The History of the Sikhs 2: 319)
The fear of Khushwant Singh may be the fear of a community which claims itself to be special.

In this context the argument of Khushwant Singh for a special position for the Sikhs in the armed forces sounds interesting. He feels that their proportion has declined from one third during the British rule to under 10 per cent today. His discontentment also reveals his sense of pride regarding his religion:

... there is fear that present percentage may decline further with the policy of recruitment according to population proportions... it is imperative that the percentage of Sikhs in the armed forces should not be reduced. (My Bleeding Punjab 85)

The Sikhs consider themselves far superior to others in the art of fighting and in other fields of human activities. They take immense pride in it. But this kind of self-esteem also leads to a sense of alienation. As a result social tension builds up and the outcome invariably is sociological alienation which is experienced by both the Sikhs and the non-Sikhs.
The following statement of Khushwant Singh seems to segregate the Sikhs from the national canvas:

... anything an Indian can do, the Sikh can do better. Three of the first nine Indians who scaled Mount Everest were Sikhs. More than a third of all India's athletic teams comprise Sikhs. (My Bleeding Punjab 26)

Maybe, Khushwant Singh has failed to notice that the word 'Indian' includes Sikhs also.

This fear over the survival of their religion and identity was exploited by the unscrupulous leaders like Bhindranwale. He encouraged the religious fundamentalism and the cult of violence. Khushwant Singh puts the blame on the Government for helping Bhindranwale to build himself into a leader and for allowing its police and paramilitary forces to turn a blind eye to the smuggling of arms into the Golden Temple which led to the ordering of the Bluestar Operation.

In Khushwant Singh's view the Bluestar Operation instead of stamping out terrorism and the feeling of separatism "... engendered feelings of alienation and induced hundreds of young Sikh men and women to turn into terrorists." (The History of the Sikhs 2: 375).
In the three years of communal violence to the Punjab, the victims were mostly Hindus. So, immediately after the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi there was violent repercussion. But this time it was the Sikhs who were at the receiving end. Khushwant Singh, as a historian in spite of his strong Sikh consciousness records this honestly:

What no doubt fueled this anti-Sikh feeling was the fact that hardly any Sikh leader of consequence had boldly spoken out against Bhindranwale or the killings of innocent Hindus by terrorist gangs. (The History of the Sikhs 2: 381)

The Operation "Teach-the-Sikhs-a-lesson" reminded one of the violence let loose during the Partition. Thousands of innocent Sikhs were killed; and thousands were rendered homeless. Khushwant Singh is angry with the Government for not having taken any swift action to curb the violence against the Sikhs. Further to add insult to injury, Rajiv Gandhi almost condoned the violence in one sentence: "when a mightly banyan tree falls the earth beneath it is bound to shake." (The Hindustan Times 20 Nov. 1984). Above all, for the killings of thousands of innocent Sikhs, not a single person was punished. So the Sikh community felt alienated and let down by the government miserably. Consequently, some
of the Sikhs distanced themselves from the national mainstream and they passed a resolution proclaiming Khalistan.

A careful analysis of The History of Sikhs reveals the fact that Khushwant Singh's subconscious sense of the Sikh consciousness and his instinctual longing for maintaining a Sikh identity under any circumstances at any cost make inroads upon the objective character of the book. But the subjectivity is only sincere, though emotional and does not go to the extent of distortion of historical facts. As a historian he pinpoints the degradation meted out to the Sikh religion and as a committed member of the community his tone is one of self-pity. He presents a glorious past of the Sikh religion and the miserable present to which the organised religion has been pushed to. Perhaps, the unholy activities that he sees in his own religion could also be the reason for his religious-alienation. In this regard his remarks are outspoken:

Devotion to religion gave way to display of religiosity. Religious life declined into meaningless ritual and Akhand Paths through hired granthis; worship of the Granth, as if it were an idol, replaced its study as a hymnal of religious philosophy.... The message of goodwill towards all mankind enshrined in the
Granth has been reduced to a litany to be chanted on ceremonial occasions (The History of the Sikhs 2: 416)

As a true artist, Khushwant Singh transcends his Sikh-consciousness and becomes Man thinking for the whole humanity.

Quite interestingly, the problem of the Sikhs has been dealt with by a non-Sikh writer Romen Basu in his novel My Own Witness. He remarks: "Their [the Sikhs] plight is a microcosm of all the injustices against minorities throughout the world" (My Own Witness 236). Onkar Singh, the hero of My Own Witness, desists from firing at Manga Ram who is responsible for the desecration of the Sikh’s holiest shrine. He shows commendable religious tolerance and seeks universal brotherhood by giving up violence, attachment, avarice and wrath. Towards the end of the novel, Onkar Singh, like Khushwant Singh, declares:

... Khalistan is not the aim of the majority of the Sikhs. They seek honour and justice within India. (My Own Witness 223)

Though born in a highly orthodox Sikh religious family, Khushwant Singh has gradually become an agnostic. As he grew up, he was fed up with the meaningless rituals and was
thoroughly disappointed with the organised religion. It is Bernard Shaw's character Undershaft who says, "If your old religion broke down yesterday, get a newer and a better one for tomorrow" (The Complete Plays 498). And Khushwant Singh, annoyed over the total breakdown of today's religion, presents a blueprint for a new religion in India. It is of the utmost relevance and interest. In the modern Indian context, the concept of a new religion gains significance. Though we have enough religions to make us hate, we do not have enough to make us love one another.

In Khushwant Singh's view it is pointless to debate on whether or not God exists. The agnostic in him states:

One can be a saintly person without believing in God, and a detestable villain believing in Him. In my personalised religion, God has no place. (Need For a New Religion in India & Other Essays 6)

In every religion, the founder is more revered than God. The classic example of giving the Messenger a higher status than God himself is found in present day Islam. Khushwant Singh condemns, deifying the Messengers as an act of grave injustice; it makes them believe that they are incomparably good and infallible. While in most cases the opposite is true, the gullible people take their word as gospel truth in
times of communal crisis and act violently forgetting God's message of love. Khushwant Singh seems to say that in any personalised religion God can be directly communicated with while institutionalised religions do more harm than good.

In his characteristic outspoken manner, Khushwant Singh ridicules the chanting or reciting of scriptures without bothering about the meaning of the words. This practice, really, arouses emotional fervour; but it is repetitive and tediously boring. In his opinion scriptures should be read and understood and not worshipped. Khushwant Singh in all fairness laughs at his own religion. The Sikhs worship the guru's writing as an idol worthy of worship. But they proclaim God to the Nirankaar (formless) and forbid the worship of idols. Being an insider, Khushwant Singh knows the defects of his religious rituals; and by alienating himself from the religion he becomes an outsider and makes fun of his religious tradition.

They [the Sikhs] drape the Granth Sahib in silk and brocade, rouse it in the mornings and put it to rest in the evenings, take it out in processions on holy days, and have it read by professional granthis all through the night while they themselves slumber. (Need for a New Religion 9)
Nowadays the places of worship which should be the symbols of love have become places of ill-will and hatred. In this context, the Golden Temple, Ram Janma Bhoomi and Babri Masjid have unfortunately become centres for propagating hatred and religious fanaticism. The vested interests use these holy places for fanning up religious disharmony. A committed writer like Khushwant Singh makes a fervent appeal to have religious tolerance. He beautifully sums up his view quoting a couplet by a Punjabi Suji poet:

Break down the mosque, break down the temple
Break down whatever there is besides;
But never break a human heart
That is where God Himself resides.

(qtd. in Need for a New Religion 10)

Irrespective of religious affiliations, Indians spend more time performing religious rituals than any other people in the world. Moreover, we have too many religious holidays. Khushwant Singh argues vehemently against losing millions of man hours in pursuits which produce no material benefits. In this context, it is worth considering what Addison has said humorously of keeping holy the seventh day,

... in which the whole village meet together with their best faces, and in their cleanliest habits, to converse with one another upon
indifferent subjects, hear their duties explained to them, and join together in adoration of the Supreme Being. Sunday clears away the rust of the whole week. . . . ("Sir Roger at Church" 29)

Khushwant Singh points out that rituals do not make a man a better human being.

Khushwant Singh is equally against noise pollution created by the loud speakers in places of worship. They disturb the tranquil atmosphere of the locality and cause a lot of inconvenience to all, especially to the sick and to the students. Unnecessary exhibitions of religious fervour should be curbed and a scientific outlook on life should be inculcated. He is highly critical of the official media like All India Radio and Doordarshan for propagating religion.

Khushwant Singh's work ethic is in tune with what Rudyard Kipling's lines convey:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And -- which is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!

(218)
True to the teaching of Guru Nanak, Khushwant Singh wants his new religion for India to be based on the work ethic:

Kirt karo, naam japo, vand chako - work, worship and give in charity. (Need for a New Religion 14)

The importance to work -- which is very much lacking in India -- is emphasized by the slogan coined by Khushwant Singh "work is worship, but worship is not work."

The essence of all religions is love - love to all living beings. To keep the eco-system intact, Khushwant Singh advocates a ban on hunting and trapping of birds and animals. He would like his new religion to have a vision of the future. His social commitment makes him include family planning as an integral part of the religion. His seriousness on this issue is explicit when he vehemently declares that people have no right to overload an already over-populated country. In India, Khushwant Singh seems to be aware, that people would look for religious sanction even for doing small things. If family planning becomes part of the religion, Khushwant Singh is confident that its success is ensured. His concern for the preservation of environment finds expression in his appeal for an immediate halt to the practice of cremating the dead on funeral pyre. Instead he
would like people to opt for burial or electric crematorium while performing the last rites.

The core of this new religion, Khushwant Singh finds in a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

So many gods, so many creeds, so many paths that wind and wind
When just the art of being kind is all that the sad world needs. (qtd. in Need for a New Religion 17)

Indeed Khushwant Singh's concept of new religion is a successful blending of religion with science. His views may not be acceptable to the traditional religious minds. Such a new religion may not be possible in the immediate future. But his views would definitely set people to think after the initial shock. Most of his views sound like those of an agnostic. But, a closer objective analysis would reveal his humanistic mind which is keen on finding a way for humanity to be happy.

A man of Khushwant Singh's nature would certainly weigh a religious personality against his/her service to humanity. His article on "Mother Teresa, Apostle of the Unwanted" is full of serene feelings. When Khushwant Singh
asked the mother how she without any sense of disgust could touch people with loathsome diseases like leprosy and gangrene, she replied:

I see Jesus in every human being, I say to myself: this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has gangrene, dysentery and cholera. I must wash him and tend to him. I serve him because I love Jesus. (Not A Nice Man to Know 26)

The article concludes with this reply and Khushwant Singh does not make any comment on this. But the following comment by Shyamala A. Narayan explains the silence of Khushwant Singh:

Even if we are willing to believe in the miraculous powers of the other Gurus and Godmen, we are tempted to ask what they have done to alleviate suffering and make the world a little more livable for the poor millions of India. (The Indian P.E.N 19-20)

Mother Teresa's service to humanity exemplifies Christ's words:

Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my
brethren, ye have done it unto me.

(Matthew 25.40)

This is what exactly is the essence of Khushwant Singh's concept of new religion which prefers Christ-in-action to Christ-in-words.

Khushwant Singh is not a politician. So his reaction to political events are not biased. Without fear and favour, he criticizes all dignitaries irrespective of their political and economical status. His editorship of The Illustrated Weekly of India provided him with ample opportunities to meet important personalities in India and Pakistan.

The book Indira Gandhi Returns is a testimony to prove that Khushwant Singh's admiration cannot be taken for granted. His verdict about a personality varies from issue to issue. His assessment is based on values which he cherishes.

In his opinion Indira Gandhi was the only one with the stature of an International leader. For instance, he refers to the Paris Press Conference addressed by her in 1969 as a superb performance. To the questions which she did not want to answer, she dodged with the skill of a seasoned statesman; to the awkward questions she replied with
commendable brevity. To the pleasant surprise of all, she answered in French to a question put in French. With a sense of pride, Khushwant Singh comments:

... how many leaders of the world can face the world press and deport themselves with the dignity showed by this diminutive woman?

(Indira Gandhi Returns 32)

And again, he gives the credit to Indira Gandhi for having led the country to victory in the Indo-Pak war.

But he is critical of Indira Gandhi for seeking the advice from her kitchen cabinet. It consisted people of her choice and civil servants who were not answerable to the parliament. Consequently, instead of getting honest responsible advice, she allowed herself to be guided by sycophants. It is but natural that human ego enjoys flattery. But flatterers take advantage of the foibles of the great and foster their errors. They never give advice which may annoy. In a sense they are the worst kind of enemies. As Khushwant Singh predicted there was a setback in the political career of Indira Gandhi due to the influence of the kitchen cabinet. The outspoken nature of Khushwant Singh would not allow him to become a flatterer though it is easy to flatter.
Khushwant Singh's love for the suffering humanity transcends national boundaries and reaches out even to the enemies. This nobility in him forced him to meet the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in order to seek the release of over 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war held by India. Indira Gandhi was not pleased with his humanitarian mission. She remarked: "Mr. Singh, your activities have been very embarrassing to me" (Indira Gandhi Returns 41).

He retorted politely:

Indiraji, I am glad to hear you say so, because that has been precisely the object of my exercise.... Nothing that is morally wrong can be politically right. Holding a vanquished army as prisoners is both a moral and political crime. (41)

The embarrassment caused by Khushwant Singh produced the desired result; a few months later Mrs. Gandhi began to relent. This is a classic example for the social and humanitarian commitment of Khushwant Singh.

After all, a writer cannot fight against the government; but it lies within his power to embarrass the people in power. In England, Charles Dickens, too did the same thing through his novel Oliver Twist. The novel was
exciting and humorous but also pathetic; it was an indictment of orphanages and of the London slums where victimised paupers were bred in crime school. After the publication of the novel, the government felt embarrassed and effected drastic reforms in the functioning of the orphanages.

Mrs. Gandhi felt that things were getting out of hand in India. So she declared Emergency on June 26, 1975. It was generally acclaimed by the masses. Schools and colleges and shops reopened, planes and trains ran on time. There was no violence on the street. Khushwant Singh supported the move to silence the vociferous opponents of the government for a short period to restore law and order in the country. But he strongly opposed the Press censorship. As a mark of protest he refused to bring out *The Illustrated Weekly* for three weeks. Khushwant Singh's action reflected his courage and conviction in the context of the strict Emergency laws. But most of the other editors did not even lodge a protest. About those editors L.K. Advani, a noted parliamentarian sarcastically remarked: "Mrs. Gandhi only asked you to bend; you decided to crawl before her" (qtd. in Khushwant Singh "Emergency: Why I supported it; and then did not" 32).

As a true democrat, Khushwant Singh is keen on preserving democracy. For this, peace and stability in the
country are very essential. To achieve stability, economic prosperity is very essential. Economic prosperity will provide the base for successful democracy. To substantiate this, Khushwant Singh quotes the views expressed by Bertrand Russell:

If one man offers you democracy and another offers you a bag of grain, at what stage of starvation will you prefer the grain to the vote? (qtd. in Indira Gandhi Returns 98)

It is nothing but the sense of urgency that made Khushwant Singh support Sanjay Gandhi despite the fact that Sanjay did not have the constitutional authority to do what he did. Sanjay gave top priority to family planning because he sincerely felt that all the developments by our planned policies would be nullified if we remained rabbit-like in our unplanned breeding of ourselves. The great historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who too feels the seriousness of the problem, states:

... for coping with the continuing increase in population through the reduction of the death-rate will be to offset this increase by a corresponding reduction in the birth rate.... The birth-rate, on the other hand, can be lowered only by persuading or compelling
parents to limit the size of their families.

(A Toynbee Reader 122)

Further, Khushwant Singh is all praise for Sanjay's interest in keeping our cities clean, and for the community service projects like eradication of caste, illiteracy and dowry. Sanjay was a little over-enthusiastic in the implementation of his schemes. Khushwant Singh seems to approve of this; to him, having the authority and not exercising it for the welfare of the people is no good. Somebody has to act before it is too late. One cannot fully agree with this point of view. But one cannot also deny that there is something sensible in it.

Immediately after the emergency was lifted the press made a somersault. It turned into a sycophantic orchestra singing praises of the new government. Mrs.Gandhi and Sanjay became the main target of the pressmen's barbed shafts. Khushwant Singh did not fall in line and he was eased out of the editorship of The Illustrated Weekly of India unceremoniously. Alienating himself from the tribe of press personnel, he called on Mrs.Gandhi several times when she had ceased to be Prime Minister. Maybe, Khushwant Singh belongs to David Garrick's school of thought:

Let others hail the rising sun
I bow to that whose race is run
(qtd in Indira Gandhi Returns 121)

The uniqueness of Khushwant Singh lies in the fact that he sees surprisingly different from the way most of us customarily see.

Of course, Emergency excesses were there. But Khushwant Singh is of the view that they were all blown out of proportion to tarnish the image of Mrs. Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. As usual, Khushwant Singh was unique in not joining either of the two camps which supported the extreme views on Emergency. For instance, the then Congress President coined a new slogan, "India is Indira; Indira is India". And eminent people like Kuldip Nayar, Janardan Thakur and T.V.R. Shenoy condemned Emergency in toto. Speaking of the impact of Emergency Kuldip Nayar feels:

Fear, if not terror, stalked the land. The daughter of Jawaharlal Nahru, who gave India parliament, the constitution and the law, destroyed every norm or precedent to become the law unto herself. She even allowed her ambitious and immature son, Sanjay Gandhi, to run the country, as if it were her personal fiefdom. ("Remains of the Day" 30)
As for Khushwant Singh he defended Emergency first, and then he started opposing it. When it was lifted in January 1977, everybody was rejoicing; but Khushwant Singh was dismayed at the prospect of family planning and slum clearance programmes losing their priority. With a sense of humour he accepts this contradiction in him and attributes this to human perversity. After all, inconsistency is the mark of progress and Khushwant Singh changes his views taking into consideration the existing factors. May be, it looks like contradicting oneself. But even the great Walt Whitman defends this:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

("Song of Myself" 1322-1324)

The outspokenness of Khushwant Singh is not a sign of vulgarity. Instead, this quality reveals his sincerity and scientific outlook.

Sex is an important aspect of human biology. Khushwant Singh lampoons the hypocrisy of Indians who pretend to ignore that sex is woven into the whole texture of human body. But the ancient people of our country considered sex as an art and they produced the most widely read treatise on sex Kama Sutra. Further, they elevated the art of sex to
spiritual sublimity by explicit depictions on the temples. It is a sad commentary on this ancient tradition that today most of the people have no idea that sex can be pleasurable.

Khushwant Singh narrates an incident - which he claims to have witnessed - in which a newly married couple had their nuptial consummation in a night train from Delhi to Bhopal. The lust in them was so much that they became completely oblivious of the presence of strangers and the concept of privacy was alien to them as that of love. Khushwant Singh insists on the importance of knowing each other before marriage. The iconoclast in him finds expression in the following:

Arranged marriages are the accepted norm:
"Love" marriages a rarity. In arranged marriages the parties first make each others acquaintance physically through the naked exploration of each others bodies and it is only after some of the lust has been drained out of their systems that they get the chance to discover each others minds and personalities. ("Sex in Indian Life" Sex, Scotch & Scholarship 46-47)

By the time the couple realises a clash of temperaments between them it becomes too late and they suffer till the
end of their days. Khushwant Singh is proud of his wife for having independently made her choice in matrimony. He jibes at today's modern girls who enjoy their freedom in trivial matters relating to hair style and dress, but tamely surrender their right to choose husbands to their parents.

The analysis of poverty in India reveals Khushwant Singh's genuine concern for the pathetic condition of the poor in India. The squalor and scenes of poverty and human degradation in Calcutta were so oppressing that Khushwant Singh's friend an English lady -- who had claimed that she was shock-proof because she had had all the culture shocks sociologists talk about -- felt terribly shocked and upset. So much so that she could not eat her supper that day.

Since Independence many things have changed for the better in India. India is the world's seventh largest producer of industrial goods; India has next to the United States and Russia, the third largest pool of scientific and technical manpower. But, oddly, India is among the poorest of the poor of the world, the tenth from the bottom of the list of impoverished nations.

We have a situation full of paradoxes. Khushwant Singh pleads his inability to understand the existence of such paradoxes. At the same time, his analysis gives a clear
signal of warning that unless a war on poverty is declared and won, individual liberty and security under law will in course of time be wiped out. Khushwant Singh's sensitivity to the problems of the poor brings out the sociological commitment in him.

What makes Khushwant Singh's travelogues special is his total lack of inhibition. He tells us all he has seen -- missing out nothing -- be it a rebuffed pass at a girl or a joke at his expense or a lecherous intention that came to nothing. It highlights one of his unique gifts -- the ability to laugh at himself.

Khushwant Singh is "notorious" for his bias in favour of Pakistan and he has paid the price for airing such views by being dubbed a Pakistani agent. A deeper analysis of Khushwant Singh's emotional attachment to Pakistan implies that he is an alien in India both emotionally and sociologically. His statement, "I return to the country where I was born, brought up, and sustained for the first half of my life as a stranger" (Many Moods Many Faces 52), throws more light on his paradoxical situation which presents him as an alien in Pakistan as well. But his emotional attachment for Pakistan transcends boundaries, wars and political machinations. His attachment is born out of a rare sociological feature which never allows hatred to
overcome his love for his neighbour. This rare feature makes him an alien in the ordinary society which believes in the concept "good fences make good neighbours."

Travel has broadened Khushwant Singh's mind; yet his mind has no room to take in anything more exotic. That is why he says: "No sooner I land in a foreign country, instead of looking forward to exploring its charms, I count the days when I will return to my own country" (Many Moods Many Faces 114). This homesickness along with a sense of alienation makes Khushwant Singh an enigmatic personality.

Khushwant Singh is, perhaps, the only Indian English writer who portrays India in the true perspective. His frankness hurts often, but it is almost always desirable. This helps one to see things in the proper perspective and in a more critical viewpoint. In his characteristic manner, he replies to the question why he is an Indian:

I did not have any choice: I was born one. If the good Lord had consulted me on the subject I might have chosen a country more affluent, less crowded, less censorious in matters of food and drink, unconcerned with personal equations and free of religious bigotry. (We Indians 36)
Behind the mask of a humorous statement is the real, sad Khushwant Singh with a sense of alienation from many of the aspects of the society he lives in. Living is more comfortable abroad. Wine and food are better and there is more fun. However, Khushwant Singh soon gets tired of all those things and wants "to get back to my dung-heap and be among my loud mouthed, sweaty, and smelly countrymen (We Indians 37). This kind of emotional attachment with India despite many shortcomings here could not be experienced by Nissim Ezekiel.

Nissim Ezekiel was born of Jewish parents in Bombay. He is not a Hindu, and his background makes him a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate him to India. In "Background, Casually" he states his case unambiguously:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.
(Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets 37)

Both Khushwant Singh and Nissim Ezekiel have a sense of alienation. While Khushwant Singh experiences an intellectual alienation, Nissim Ezekiel experiences an emotional alienation because of his rootlessness.
Among the problems of the post-Independence India, the challenge to the unity of the country has often become formidable. Khushwant Singh argues that our guaranteed diversity is our strength as a nation. He categorically asserts that along with patriotism, religious and linguistic identity are very essential. If any attempt is made to obliterate any regional language or religion in favour of one "national" language or religion it will destroy the unity of the country.

Quite contrary to the spirit of national integration the Hindi Chauvinists oppose the presence of English in India. In their over enthusiasm to make Hindi the national language, they want to obliterate English and other regional languages of India. As a result, the sentiment of the people for their own regional languages has been aroused. The linguistic disputes have assumed alarming proportions and as Khushwant Singh puts it,

... the insistence by the states that administration be conducted in regional languages has created problems of communications with the centre and other states. A fostered regional chauvinism now threatens the integrity of the country.

(India: An Introduction 189)
But Khushwant Singh puts forward his unbiased arguments for the retention of English. If English is a foreign language, he argues, even Sanskrit was a foreign language; it was brought to India by our Aryan forefathers. Both Hindi and Urdu were born out of these once-foreign languages. English served us in the past as it does today. It was the language of our protest against our rulers -- a powerful weapon wielded by Tilak, Gokhale, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi and Nehru. Paradoxically more than any other language, it gave us the sense of Indianness.

Even from a practical point of view, Khushwant Singh considers English to be not only the link language which will keep India together but also the language of opportunity. It opens the window of India to the world. The practical solution for this issue as Khushwant Singh expresses in the following statement illustrates how he is capable of communicating his wise thoughts through simple language:

So, dear Bhashawallas, make peace with Angrezi. Drape her in a Banaras brocade sari as you would if your son brought home a foreign daughter-in-law. But don't waste your energies fighting against her because she has come to stay "till death do us part." (We Indians 122)
Khushwant Singh's suggestion for developing a uniform script for the whole of India is worth considering in view of the sensitive language issue that constantly threatens the unity of the country. If Roman script is made the official script, we can solve the problem of the entire nation by writing all languages in Roman. This can also facilitate the learning of other European languages. It will be a great advantage to have the same script as the rest of the world. It is Khushwant Singh's speciality to take interest in any issue of national importance and express his opinion which would draw the attention of everybody.

Khushwant Singh speaks on all aspects of life. What is interesting is, he has something individualistic to say. His outspokenness is quite obvious. His peculiar nature of being an insider-outsider has been consistently revealed throughout his writing. The punch of Khushwant Singh can significantly be felt in whatever he writes, whether it is a short story dealing with the superstitious conservative or a painful novel depicting the atrocities during the Partition or a dispassionate essay suggesting a commonsensical new religion. The unifying factor underlying all his writings is his sincerity and his sense of commitment. He could reach all kinds of readers belonging to all walks of life. This is possible because of his characteristic way of writing. One can have the feel of English English in some of his writings.
while one cannot miss a dirty joke at the expense of a Sikh. The credit goes to his style of writing. What he has written has been the point of discussion so far. How his style has helped to achieve what he has achieved is the focus of the next chapter.