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**THE MAVERICK JOURNALIST - KHUSHWANT SINGH**

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**ABSTRACT**

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The literary article's focus is to highlight on the Maverick journalist Khushwant Singh's journalistic career. The up's and down's of his journalistic career, his achievements as a writer, journalist, diplomat, and a social reformer where he embarked on to journalism to reform the society and to bring oneness in the society, using journalism as a tool to eradicate the differences of caste, and free the masses from the evils of corruption and poverty. Khushwant Singh's endeavour as a successful Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and the intellect behind the revolution of the magazine becoming one of the most talked about, needs special focus. The maverick journalist proved himself so with his bold columns laced with acid wit through his column "With Malice Towards One and All." A mighty journalist and a revered person, though the son of controversy, has left behind an interesting history. This article is an attempt to throw light on the journey of an interesting author, writer and journalist, an iconoclast Khushwant Singh.

**Key words:** Maverick, Journalist, Editor, Controversy, Malice,

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Eminent journalist and writer Khushwant Singh has always been in the news for his bare all, dare all writings which have always stirred a storm in the tea cup. Arguably the best journalist that India has ever witnessed, Khushwant Singh who began his career as a barrister, was lured into writing, journalism in particular to create a niche for himself in the literary world. As a candid journalist Khushwant Singh's writings triggered the ire of many in all walks of life, at times even jeopardizing his life. But nothing could deter the indomitable spirit of this honest journalist who has also been awarded with 'Honest Man of The Year' in the year 2012 by Sulabh International. As a writer Khushwant Singh has been applauded for his soul-stirring writings like *Train To Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale Sing*, *Delhi*, etc., but the fact that the circulation of *The Illustrated Weekly* shot upto 4,00,000 from 65,000 in a span of nine years, showcases Khushwant Singh's journalistic acumen and the fact that he knew the pulse of his readers. He was the high priest of journalism, an icon of his times, a critic, historian and a prolific writer who undertook painstaking research, to present to the readers such authentic writings which left an indelible mark in the minds of the readers.

He was a great storywriter, historian, political writer, essayist, biographer, translator, novelist and journalist. Since independence he has been the country's most well-known English writer. The multifarious roles that he played such as that of a lawyer, diplomat, critic, journalist, novelist, humorist, naturalist and politician rendered Khushwant Singh a larger than life persona. Dr. Bideswar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, says,

Khushwant's biggest attribute is that he speaks what he feels. He is honest to the extent that he offends even his friends and even some revered icons. It does not matter to him that it jeopardizes his chances in life. I think it is this quality that made Gandhi into a Mahatma. (*Web, Sikhi wiki*)

In Indian literary history Khushwant Singh is destined to be remembered as one of the finest historians and novelists, a forthright political commentator, an outstanding observer and social critic. He is attributed with freethinking. Khushwant Singh's comparisons of social and behavioural characteristics of Indians and Westerners are the examples of his acid wit.

#### **Birth of the Maverick Journalist**

Khushwant Singh's journalistic career was born out of spite when his inflated ego was picked by a then Punjab Minister. He wreaked his revenge by a three-part series on the minister in *The Tribune*, where he changed the name but the portrait was close enough to be recognised. In fact, this incident led to the birth of the famous short story *Karma* by Khushwant Singh. His journey as a journalist/writer was flagged off from here, a journey which he embarked upon successfully for the next 70 years, where he not only savoured the nectar of success, but also had to gulp the bitter medicine of rejection, controversy and expulsion as an editor. But Khushwant Singh is not a man to be easily bogged down by setbacks, his anger gave form to humour in his writings and he used humour as a lethal weapon. He advises one to refrain from anger. He says, "If you get angry, it doesn't serve the purpose. But make somebody into a laughing stock and you kill him." (*Web, Outlook, Interview*). After the 1950s, Khushwant Singh changed gears, and became more and more involved in journalism, the current happenings igniting the spark in this Maverick journalist.

For nine years, between 1969 and 1978, he was the editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Under the British, it was effectively a colonial society magazine, and it didn't change much under its first two Indian editors. Khushwant Singh has been lauded for his intellect and wisdom for bringing a revolution in the magazine and its sales figures. Professor Amardeep Singh writes,

As an editor, it was wild, sometimes trashy American culture in and after the 1960s that Khushwant brought into the pages of *The Illustrated Weekly*: rock n' roll, the Vietnam war protests, and the counter-culture (including the significant component of barefoot, Enlightenment-seeking hippies who ended up in India). Admittedly, some of the pictures of bikini-clad free-love kids in Goa splashed on the pages of *The Illustrated Weekly* were rather more like tabloid sensationalism than serious journalism, but there's no doubt that these images had an effect on how Indians saw themselves in that era. (*Web, lehigh.edu*)

Between 1951-53, he was appointed to edit the government journal *Yojana*. In the spring of 1969 he was offered the job of Editor in *The Illustrated Weekly*, which he readily accepted. The previous Editor, Raman contributed to the magazine in a manner wherein the magazine ended up decorating the waiting rooms of doctors', hair-dressers and dentists'. Singh's taking over as the editor was the turning point for the magazine and also for Khushwant Singh who evolved into a comprehensive and controversial journalist, his journalism laced with acid wit and humour. Khushwant Singh was the first editor in the history of Indian journalism to take over the editor's page for himself. But instead of pontificating about himself and adding his own mug shots, he reflected about anything and everything under the sun. V.S. Naipaul termed this as "an appetising way of writing. --- Khushwant has always been a selfless encourager of Indian talent. It's his own brand of patriotism." (*Web, Outlook, Interview*) He treading the world of journalism with the appetising way of writing which was a talent he nurtured in himself during his stint as a lecturer in American universities and colleges in Princeton, Hawaii and Swarthmore. Khushwant Singh's niche capability was to be observant and an unerring eye for the human folly, which fuelled his writing skills and added more popularity to his editor's page. It wouldn't be hyperbolic to state that Khushwant Singh tried to change the image of India in the visions of the world, where until then India was imagined as a pathetic nation filled with snakes, gutters and dark-skinned illiterate people. Though this controversial writing took him to great heights and made him sought after by many

politicians, starlets, tycoons, writers, lawyers etc., he didn't allow success to get to his head. In his book *Not A Nice Man To Know*, he humbly says,

Without wearing the false cloak of humility, let me say quite honestly that I do not rate myself very highly. I can tell good writing from the not so good, the first-rate from the passable. I know that of the Indians or the India-born, Nirad Chaudhuri, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth handle the English language better than I."(3)

Khushwant Singh is best represented for his qualities by the journal's photographer Mario Miranda where he has shown Khushwant Singh inside a bulb surrounded by a pile of books, bottle of scotch, and some girlie magazines etc., which later became the title of one his books *Sex, Scotch and Scholarship*. He used this caricature of himself for the editorial of *The Illustrated Weekly*.

The circulation witnessed a steady increase with coverage of news like the Indo-Pak war fought for the liberation of Bangladesh. The fact that he would provoke the ire of the Hindus by supporting the Muslims did not deter Khushwant Singh and he religiously highlighted the sufferings and the loss that the Muslims underwent during Hindu-Muslim riots, due to which he was termed pro-Pakistani. He states about the ire that he had invoked in his book *Truth, Love & A Little Malice*, he writes thus, "The Illustrated Weekly was the only journal to persist in pressuring the government to release the 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war when it was over."(255). This statement of his provoked the ire of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Khushwant Singh had no illusions of having been a distinguished editor. The downfall of his career began when he aided the Gandhis in more ways than one, for which he was termed as the 'chamcha' of the Gandhis in the Parliament when he was a Member of the Rajya Sabha. Khushwant Singh has always been articulate enough to pacify his opponents and be in the good books of the same people like General Tikka Khan or Indira Gandhi or Morarji Desai etc. His short stint with *National Herald* wasn't devoid of controversies either.

In 1980, after he was fired from *The Illustrated Weekly* Khushwant Singh was nominated as Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha along with the post of Editor for *The Hindustan Times*. His main contribution to this paper was the controversial and interesting column 'With Malice Towards One and All' which was the most widely read column throughout the country and was reproduced in over a dozen English papers in State capitals and in translations in regional languages all over the country. Khushwant Singh quotes in his book *Truth, Love & A Little Malice*, about his Malice column thus, "Much as my fellow journalists and editors scoffed at my brand of journalism. There were many people who took *The Hindustan Times* only on Saturdays to read what they called the 'Malice column.' "(307)

One of the most striking features of his writings is his outright honesty. None other than Khushwant Singh can be the torch bearer of truth, for his actions speak louder than his words. When Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister went ahead with 'The Operation Blue Star' to cleanse the Golden Temple of Bhindranwale and his men, the stubborn action by the Prime Minister forced Khushwant Singh to return his citation awarding him the Padma Bhushan to the then President Giani Zail Singh. When told by the President not to act hastily, the journalist's reply as stated in his book *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, is as follows," I don't want to give myself time to change my mind. I had sworn that if the army entered the temple I would renounce the honours bestowed on me by this government. I don't think my qum (community) will ever forgive me for this."(326) Khushwant Singh without any hesitation advised Indira Gandhi through his articles and speeches to ask for forgiveness by visiting the Golden temple as a pilgrim.

His writings not only invoked the ire of the powerful and mighty politicians but also that of the some unwanted elements of the society like Khalistanis. He was a soft target for the group to gain some publicity they badly needed. He had a narrow escape only to end up penning more controversial articles and books till the last. The fear of death at this time, drove Khushwant Singh to pen his autobiography. He extensively covered various current issues in columns in the *Hindustan Times* that created hindrances in the development of the masses. He reflected upon the sufferings of the masses and the country witnessing very little development due to the rampant corruption and religious fundamentalism ruling the roost. He not only highlighted the sufferings of the Muslim masses during the community riots but also lauded the efforts of the

Christian missionaries for the untiring efforts for betterment in the field of education, or other charitable work. He has expressed his views about the Christians thus,

What impressed me most was the Christian contribution to the development of our country. They run the best schools, colleges and hospitals. Whenever any catastrophe like an earthquake or flood occurs, they are the first to arrive on the scene to provide medical assistance, food, shelter and whatever else is needed.(*Hindustan Times, July 2006*)

Khushwant Singh neither opposed nor supported conversion to the different faiths. His ideal was, one should be a do-gooder to the society irrespective of their faiths and beliefs. Aware of the fact that he was putting his reputation in jeopardy, he didn't hesitate to accept in an article that he had consumed deer meat which his friend hunted in Bhopal. This gave rise to the anger of the environmentalists who had demanded an action against him. In an interview to Edward Luce of The Financial Times he says, "If you're born irreverent you don't worry about what people's reaction will be. You can tell them to go to hell. You either write what comes out of your genuine self or you don't write at all."(*Financial Times, March 2005*)

All his writings, whether in a book or an article in a newspaper, was laced with his acid wit and humour. An anecdote of this from his columns in the *Hindustan Times* would prove this fact. The article was about a party hosted by Pakistan's Counsel General. When Khushwant Singh enquired about the reason for the party, he was told that it was the anniversary celebrations for the so-called victory of Pakistan in the Indo-Pak war in 1965, Khushwant Singh was shocked. When questioned, the General stated that, if he had mentioned the reason many friends like Khushwant Singh would not have been part of the party. He wittily replied, "My friend, be sure people like me go anywhere where premium Scotch is served free. May Allah grant many more imaginary victories to Pakistan over India."( *Hindustan Times, Oct 2006*)

Khushwant Singh's love for journalism can be best assessed by this following quote in his book *Truth, Love & A little Malice* where he writes, "I got fulfilment out of journalism and creative writing. It was only then that I really began to relish the bounties of nature as my just reward for the work I had put in." (409-410) At the age of 96, Khushwant Singh expressed the desire to put a stop to his successful journey as a journalist, which evoked mixed feelings among the eminent journalists. Columnist David Davidarexpresses his view of Khushwant Singh in *The Telegraph* thus, "His column was an institution; an extraordinary combination of erudition and light prose and humour." (*Web, The Telegraph, 11 May 2013*) Media man Pritish Nandy, who later edited *The Illustrated Weekly* says "His style was anti-pompous, easy reading, fun and cheeky — and it attracted a lot of people who were tired of sermons." (*Web, The Telegraph, 11 May 2013*) He embarked on this eventful and controversial life of a journalist 70 years ago to awaken the masses and infuse life into the readers in the form of interesting journalism. Though he willed to end his journey for journalism, his zest for life existed in him till his last breath, for he completed a cross-word puzzle even before breathing his last. In his book *Truth, Love & A Little Malice*, writing about his retirement he mentions about his interaction with industrialist K K Birla, his then editor about his retirement plans where Khushwant Singh says, "I will retire when I go to the cremation ground."(272) This conformist maverick would be tossing and turning even his grave, desperate to churn out more controversial articles, laced with more acid wit and humourabout the current happenings.

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