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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Khushwant Singh's Journalistic Career and Political Vision: Navigating Religion, Identity, and Nationalism through His Writings

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh, one of the most widely read post-colonial writers in English, is celebrated for his multifaceted career as a distinguished journalist, adept historical novelist, influential columnist, political commentator, and social critic. His influence spans both contemporary Indian literature and journalism, having held key editorial roles at notable publications such as *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The National Herald*, and *The Hindustan Times*. Known for his wit and humour, Singh's writing continues to resonate with readers today. With a prolific body of work that includes over a hundred books—ranging from fiction and non-fiction to historical novels, short stories, and joke collections—his legacy is firmly established. At the age of 98, he published *Khushwantnama: The Lessons of My Life*. This article aims to explore his journalistic career and political vision, providing a brief look at his most influential works.

Keywords: Authentic Writer, Journalistic attribute, Partition novels, Historian, Multifaceted**1. Introduction:**

Khushwant Singh has achieved iconic status as one of the most distinguished historians and novelists in Indian literary history. His extensive body of work spans fiction, historical novels, translations, joke books, and books on topics such as Delhi, women, nature, and current affairs. He served as the founder-editor of *Yojna* and held editorial roles at *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The National Herald*, and *The Hindustan Times*. In addition to his literary career, Singh dabbled in various other fields, including law, diplomacy, radio broadcasting, and teaching. Known for his bold and often controversial views, he has both earned admiration

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and faced criticism for his irreverence. His most notable trait is his unflinching honesty, which continues to leave a lasting impression. Widely regarded as highly readable, his literary reputation remains legendary. Singh also served as a Member of Parliament from 1980 to 1986. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974, but returned the honour in 1984 to protest the Indian Army's storming of the Golden Temple.

Born on February 2, 1915, in the village of Hadali, located in Khushab district of Sargodha, Punjab (now in Pakistan), Khushwant Singh was deeply influenced by his roots. His parents, Lady Varyam Kaur and Sir Sobha Singh, moved to Delhi, leaving him in Hadali under the care of his paternal grandmother. After completing his matriculation in 1930, Singh joined St. Stephen's College in Delhi, one of the most prestigious institutions in India at the time, run by the Cambridge Mission. Although he struggled academically, it was likely during this period that his literary ambitions were sparked. He became fascinated with the Bible classes, drawn to the rhythmic language of both the Old and New Testaments. In 1934, Singh went to England with the intention of pursuing a legal career. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, he returned to India, began practicing law, and married his beloved, Kaval.

After the partition of India in 1947 and the ensuing violence, Singh left Pakistan. Struggling to make significant progress in his legal career, he applied for a position in the Ministry of External Affairs and was appointed as an information officer at the Indian High Commission in London. His career then took him to Ottawa, Canada, where he mingled with prominent figures such as journalists Kingsley Martin, Harold Evans, William Clarke, and David Astor, as well as writers like C.P. Snow, Prof. C.E.M. Joad, and poets including Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Dylan Thomas, all of whom frequented his home.

2. Literature Review:

While numerous research studies have examined Khushwant Singh and his novels, there has been limited analysis of his popular columns and journalistic works. This study aims to address this gap. R.K. Dhawan (1988) insightfully discusses Singh's tendency to provoke as a form of rebellion against established norms, stating, "Khushwant Singh seeks to shock and challenge the Victorian morality he likely found discomfiting in his younger years." Singh is recognized for introducing new trends in journalism, often questioning and defying the existing conventions. Despite the wide range of themes he covers in his columns, from society and politics to religion and philosophy, Bharat Ram (2000) offers a critical perspective on Singh's journalistic skills. He states, "I don't regard him as a great journalist because his journalism neither informs nor offers solutions. His writing lacks the urgency or depth needed to engage with political, social, or other issues. He writes more like a critic." Khushwant Singh is widely regarded as a reputed journalist, and many consider him to be quite clever. He is known for his focus on topics like sex, writing about it with a unique skill that resonates with readers. Singh has an exceptional ability to tap into what his audience enjoys, often commenting on topics that stir controversy without ever expressing regret. He writes about what he believes the common man finds interesting, showing little concern for whether something is deemed right or wrong. His writing style is direct and straightforward, which makes it easy for readers to engage with.

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Singh's ability to use simple English makes his works accessible and enjoyable to a wide audience, contributing to his immense popularity.

This study attempts to review the existing literature on Khushwant Singh's journalistic works to provide a clearer understanding of the critical analyses by various scholars. It aims to highlight the need for further exploration of his significant contributions to Indian journalism.

3. Sources of Information and Research

The present study is based upon the secondary data collected through Khushwant Singh's articles and columns published in different newspapers. The study is based on sample of 450 articles and columns of Khushwant Singh written in last five decades of his journalistic career. Longitudinal research design has been used in this study.

4. Evolution of Khushwant Singh as a Journalist

Khushwant Singh, arguably India's most widely read and controversial writer, lived through the most significant events of modern Indian history—from Independence and Partition to the Emergency and Operation Blue Star—and interacted with many of the key figures who shaped these events. To understand Singh's evolution as a journalist, it is important to examine his career progression decade by decade. However, before delving into his development as a columnist, one must consider the various influences that shaped his writing. His works were profoundly impacted by personal, social, and political events at different points in his life. Singh's writing was influenced by three distinct environments. He spent part of his childhood in a small village in Punjab (now in Pakistan), which he describes in an autobiographical sketch: "My roots are in the dunghill of a tiny Indian village. I grew up in the Indo-Anglian atmosphere of New Delhi." Later, he travelled abroad, spending time in England, Japan, the United States, Canada, and various African countries on different assignments. Shaped by his British education, Singh identified as a cultural humanist. "I am the product of both East and West," he writes, "I am, if I may coin the word, an Orio-Occidental" (J. Thompson, 1961). These varied influences played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of Khushwant Singh as a journalist.

At times, it seems that Khushwant Singh himself was uncertain about his political beliefs. His stance on the Emergency, for instance, was ambiguous. While he supported the Emergency and Sanjay Gandhi's actions, he also welcomed the return to elections, which signified a return to democracy. Despite Indira Gandhi being responsible for the Emergency, Singh encouraged his readers to vote for her, arguing that doing so would strengthen democracy. He justified his position by writing, "Indira Gandhi's decision to go back to the people for a vote of confidence proves that she never wanted to abandon democracy" (Khushwant Singh, 1977). In 1977, he urged people to vote for the Congress Party. However, twelve years later, Singh nominated L.K. Advani for a Lok Sabha seat, stating, "Our first priority is to rid the country of Congress Party rule. That's why I proposed Advani's name, hoping he will win with a resounding majority" (Khushwant Singh, 1989).

No human being is perfect, and we must accept them with all their flaws and contradictions. The same holds true for Khushwant Singh. Being a successful writer and journalist does not mean he was flawless in his thoughts and actions. Readers must accept these

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imperfections as part of his personality. This is especially true for the iconoclastic Khushwant Singh, both as an author and historian, and as a journalist.

4.1 Formative years (1959-1978)

From Table 1, during the first decade of the study (1959-1968), memoirs dominate the articles and columns, accounting for 35.29% of the content. Culture takes the second spot, while topics like economic disparity, ecology, and trivia were not addressed during this period. In the second decade (1969-1978), memoirs remain the top topic, though their share decreases to 22.64%. Rational issues take up 21.7% of the total space, and there is a notable increase in articles on political issues, rising from 9.80% to 19.81%.

Table 1. Percentage Contribution on Various Issues during 1959-1978

Culture	Rational	Memoirs	Ecology	Trivia
27.45	19.61	35.29	0	0
17.92	21.70	22.64	2.83	1.89

Period	Social	Economic	Politics
59-68	7.84	0	9.80
69-78	11.32	1.89	19.81

(Pragyan: Journal of mass Communication, Vol 10, issue 2, 2012)

Khushwant Singh's time in the UK for his studies and diplomatic assignments exposed him to various cultures, allowing him to compare developing and developed countries in terms of religious beliefs, customs, social structures, and political systems. These experiences influenced his writing, particularly his short stories, where he shared his observations. Singh was always known for defying conventions, whether social, religious, or literary. The Partition, in particular, deeply impacted his thinking, as the violence he witnessed on both sides left a lasting emotional mark on him.

This experience played a crucial role in shaping his world-renowned novel *Train to Pakistan* and also led to his contract with the Rockefeller Foundation to write the *History of the Sikhs*. Had he not been exposed to the diverse influences present in both the UK and India, he may never have become the writer and journalist he is known as today. At the time, his relationship with his wife was strained, and while working on the draft of *Train to Pakistan*, he had little else to do in London. He made productive use of his time by reading and writing. During his stay in the UK, Khushwant Singh immersed himself in the works of Shakespeare,

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Leo Tolstoy, Oscar Wilde, Aldous Huxley, and Hindu philosophy by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. The books of Melanie Klein also expanded his horizons. By the time he joined *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, he had become well-acquainted with a wide range of literary works. This exposure helped him develop a writing style that was simple and engaging for readers, enabling him to understand what they wanted to read.

Khushwant Singh is likely the most famous journalist in India, and whatever he wrote, whether fact or fiction, was published. While he was the editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, he surprised a Hindi writer by declaring that his mother tongue was English. The writer, unaware that Khushwant Singh was the son of Sir Sobha Singh, didn't realize that he had been educated in English from the start, studied law in England, and briefly practiced law in the Lahore court. Despite this, Singh always felt that his heart was elsewhere. He had been working as a journalist since 1951 without formal training. In his early years, he was bold and straightforward, never hesitating to speak his mind. Singh used to organize press conferences and interviews for Master Tara Singh with foreign journalists. However, in the 1960s, he underwent a transformation, becoming more aligned with politicians and losing some of his earlier objectivity. When Khushwant Singh began writing for newspapers, subjective reporting was becoming a trend in Indian journalism. As a result, he chose to express his opinions rather than simply report events. He revolutionized periodicals, and *The Weekly* became the definitive platform for discussions on art and religion, with no equal alternative in its field.

After independence, India underwent a significant socio-political shift that led Khushwant Singh to recognize the contradictions and limitations within religious and caste traditions. He was deeply aware of the divisions caused by caste and class, which politicians exploited for their own gain, with little effort to unify society. The rise of western cultural influences created both instability and tension, but also a sense of hope. People found themselves torn, questioning how much of these changes would endure or dismantle existing social norms. These challenges were especially evident in urban areas during the mid-twentieth century. From his early years, Khushwant Singh had been critical of the established norms and orthodox conventions surrounding religion, family, and caste. He welcomed the changes taking place and saw them as necessary. The social and nationalistic shifts of this period greatly influenced his writing. Singh always believed in the relationship between ethical values and the social system, emphasizing that no social issue should be viewed in isolation but in terms of its broader societal impact. In the post-independence period, as India sought its cultural and social identity, the country was grappling with significant social disparities. Singh's writings on spirituality and philosophy during this time reflected his scepticism towards traditional views. Even today, when spiritual leaders claim that religion and spirituality bring peace to the mind and heart, he remains doubtful of such assertions.

4.2 The Age of adoration and condemnation (1979-1988)

In third decade (1979-88) of the study, memoirs occupy maximum number of articles and columns with 26.75% followed by political issues with 24.84% (Table2). In this era, Khushwant Singh did not give much importance to social issues, as its number is merely 3.82%, matched with ecology.

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Table 2. Percentage Contribution on Various Issues during 1979-1988

Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
3.82	1.27	24.84	20.38

Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
3.82	1.27	24.84	20.38

During this decade, Khushwant Singh's career saw a significant upward trajectory. Initially, he supported the Emergency, but following a change in the ruling party, he was dismissed from *The Weekly*. After a brief period in Delhi, he was offered the editorship of *The National Herald*. However, his six-month tenure with the paper proved to be very frustrating (Khushwant Singh, 2002). Later, Sanjay Gandhi offered him a Rajya Sabha nomination and the editorship of *The Hindustan Times*, both of which he accepted. He assumed the role of editor at *The Hindustan Times* in 1980. The paper had a respectable circulation and became a daily essential for Delhi's residents, with many feeling they couldn't begin their day without it. In fact, it became the go-to publication for announcements, from advertising eligible marriage prospects to publicizing obituaries. Despite its circulation being limited to the capital and nearby areas, *The Hindustan Times* generated more revenue from advertisements than other major newspapers in larger cities with wider readerships (Khushwant Singh, 2002).

Another significant political event that deeply impacted Khushwant Singh was Operation Blue Star. He viewed Bhindranwale as a malevolent figure who deserved his fate. However, for Singh, *Operation Blue Star* was not just about eliminating Bhindranwale—it was a well-planned and deliberate insult to an entire community. Despite his indifference, and at times even hostility, towards religion, he felt a strong need to reaffirm his identity with his own community. Khushwant Singh believed he had to express his protest. Without consulting anyone—his wife was in Kasauli, his daughter at work, and his son in Bombay—he took the framed citation for the Padma Bhushan, signed by President VV Giri, to President Giani Zail Singh. At the time, Giani Zail Singh was in a deeply depressed state. "I know how you feel," he told Khushwant Singh, "but don't be hasty. Take some time to think it over before you decide." However, Khushwant Singh remained firm. "No, Gianiji, I don't want to give myself time to change my mind. I had promised myself that if the army entered the temple, I would renounce the honors the government had bestowed upon me." "To kill a rat, you don't have to bring down your house," Giani Zail Singh responded. That evening's papers reported the story, and by the morning, it was splashed across the front pages (Khushwant Singh, 2002).

4.3 The Golden Period (1989-1998)

In the fourth decade (1989-98) of the study, memoirs once again take the top spot, accounting for 25.49%, followed closely by political issues at 24.84% (Table 3). During this period, Khushwant Singh's focus on societal concerns grew significantly.

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Table3. Percentage Contribution on Various Issues during 1989-1998

Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
10.78	1.96	22.55	21.57
Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
10.78	1.96	22.55	21.57

Khushwant Singh's writings during this period covered a vast range of topics, from book reviews, biographical sketches of prominent personalities, historical features, and translations to poetry, nature, and environment, not to mention gossip and trivial matters. His focus on themes like death, spirituality, aging, and his reflections on personal habits such as reading and eating became more pronounced. He also wrote extensively about the 1984 riots, religious fanaticism, shifting weather patterns (Khushwant Singh, 1999), religious programs, corruption in Indian politics (Khushwant Singh, 1996), and much more. As political leaders exploited the divide between the rich and poor for votes, corruption and fraudulent practices like hawala became rampant.

Since the start of his career as an editor, Singh had developed a tradition of writing special pieces for Independence Day and Republic Day, which he continued throughout this period. On Independence Day, he often criticized India's achievements as a nation while also highlighting the goals that still needed to be met. In a way, he compiled a balance sheet of the nation's progress, reflecting on changes each year. He wrote about the rehabilitation of millions of Punjabis, the doubling of life expectancy, the decline in mortality rates, industrial growth, and the freedom of the press in the world's largest democracy.

4.4 The peak of glory (1999-2008)

In the fifth decade (1999-2008), he contributed a maximum of 23.14% in the Rational followed by culture 22.31% (Table 4). Because of age, he minimised his movements and spent his time in reading and reviewing the books. Memoirs number has drastically reduced to 10.74% as he told researcher that he is unable to recall many things that researcher asked him. There is an increase in trivia and economic issues with 4.96% and 3.31% respectively.

Table4. Percentage Contribution on Various Issues during 1999-2008

Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
10.74	3.31	18.18	22.31
Social	Economic	Politics	Culture
10.74	3.31	18.18	22.31

During this period, Khushwant Singh received numerous awards. Despite being a non-believer, he was honoured with the Punjab Ratna by the Khalsa Panth. The idea of someone who doesn't believe in God receiving such a prestigious award from his own community is quite paradoxical. After the ceremony, a journalist asked him, "How do you feel about all of this, considering you are a non-believer?" Singh responded, "I am deeply moved by the

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recognition. I know my time to meet my Maker, if one exists, is approaching. On my own, He is unlikely to speak to me. But when the time comes, I will show Him my award and tell Him that the Khalsa Panth has given me a passport to paradise, signed by Prakash Singh Badal. I don't need a visa from you." (Khushwant Singh, 1999).

In an interview, Sheela Reddy aptly described him: "At 94, India's Dirty Old Man and self-proclaimed 'dirty sardar' is entering a new phase of life, and he's not retiring yet. He had been reluctantly brought to Rashtrapati Bhavan, where President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam descended from the podium to present him with the highest national award for a writer to date, the Padma Vibhushan. 'It's my harvest year,' says Khushwant, almost gleeful about the national and international accolades."

Sheela Reddy also noted that a Shankara verse or an Urdu couplet could convey that one can be scholarly without being solemn.

Khushwant Singh's legacy will undoubtedly be remembered in Indian literary history as one of the finest historians, novelists, political commentators, and social critics. He is arguably one of the most influential writers, journalists, and social commentators of our time. His reach and popularity transcend linguistic and cultural divides, even reaching across the border to Pakistan. Defying the belief that no journalist can make a living from freelance writing, Khushwant Singh became a symbol of success, popularity, and wealth, writing a minimal number of words each week. While he explored spirituality, history, and social issues deeply, he also appealed to a broader audience through his popular jokes, which have been published in dozens of volumes. Having written for over seventy years, his books continue to sell rapidly. Notably, his two columns—'With Malice towards One and All', published primarily in the *Hindustan Times* and reproduced by over 100 newspapers, and an exclusive column, 'This Above All', published in *The Tribune*—remain his trademarks.

Conclusion:

This case study on Khushwant Singh highlights his extraordinary personality as a writer. Throughout his career, he has addressed a wide range of journalistic topics. He has reached heights that many could only dream of in their professional careers, establishing himself as a role model. Indian journalism will always recognize his contributions and his fearless approach to writing about diverse issues.

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