

Meeting Khushwant Singh: Delhi Part 2

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I was running late. I was due for an afternoon tea with Veena Sikri, the ex-Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh at the India International Center, after which I was to meet Khushwant Singh at his house. Who, as is well known throughout India, is notoriously finicky about guests arriving and leaving on time. Ajeet Caur, the head of SAARC's cultural and literary wing, had set up the meet with an accompanying reminder: "It was difficult. You go to his house at 7:00, and you leave promptly at 7:30." Fine with me, I had thought, since I just wanted to see him up close, not badger him with some set of questions.

But I had not accounted for Delhi's rush hour traffic, which can get as bad as Dhaka's. Stuck in a three-wheeler amid blaring horns and stalled cars, my cell phone rang. Which had been generously lent by an event manager for SAARC's folklore festival ("Aray lay lo yaar, you give back when you finished, na! Only do top up, no?").

"Yes, Veena, I'm almost there," I lied into my mobile.

No way was I even close! But thank the good Lord for human lust and avarice, as Khushwant has said over and over again. I leaned across and informed the driver that some extra bucks would be his if he did *jaldi* quick double time. He responded with an afterburners-on, crash-and-burn zigzagging sprint that careened down side roads and spun through traffic roundabouts to finally crash past the startled gatekeepers of the very staid IIC establishment. I clambered out wild-eyed to face a broad *paan*-stained grin, which got broader as I yanked out notes from my wallet and paid without counting. Jesus, let this bugger loose in the



Khushwant Singh and Ajeet Caur

Indy 500, he could wrap up it up in his sleep!

After a pleasant chat with Veena, who told me to convey her best wishes to 'Mahfuz and Zafar' back at *The Daily Star* (something I have yet to do), she dropped me off at Khushwant Singh's Sujan Singh Park apartment complex, close by the IIC. I thanked her, got out and went inside the building. It was still three minutes to 7:00, and I waited till it was a minute to, then rang the bell.

I stepped inside to a drawing room with high ceilings, into a hum of conversation arising from the several people gathered there. In a corner easy chair sat Khushwant with a laprobe on his legs. It was a plainly furnished room, with old, beat-up chairs and cushioned wooden sofas. Simple whitewashed walls, with some cobwebs and mildew stains up on the corners. I guess when you are Khushwant Singh you can live however you wish. His father Sobha Singh,

once Delhi's construction king, had built most of the city that surrounded Lutyen's Raj center. Khushwant looked frazier than in his photos, but sharp-eyed. I introduced myself, and he shook hands. "From Bangladesh, yes, Ajeet had told me," he said, and cordially bade me to sit down. A burly Sikh in a shiny blue suit promptly got up from near him and made way for me. Several bottles of whiskey occupied a side table. He looked at me curiously, and asked how long I had been in Delhi. I told him. His voice was gentle. Adjoining the drawing room was what normally would be a dining room space, but it was empty. "A drink?" Khushwant asked. How do you say no to the Grand Old Man of Delhi? So somebody handed me one, and a lady who said she was Khushwant's neighbour, an Assamese, came over to sit by me and recount her experiences of working in the Calcutta refugee camps during the 1971 war.

The mention of 1971 perked up Khushwant. "You know," he said to me, "I went to Bangladesh just after the war to report for The New York Times -- in an Indian Air Force transport plane." I said I had read about his going in his autobiography *Truth, Love & A Little Malice*, but he had written little about Bangladesh there. He shrugged and didn't say anything. Bangladesh did come up in the book in the context of a Khushwant visit to Pakistan and meeting with Tikka Khan, who angrily denied charges of genocide by his forces. Suddenly, though, he turned to me and said that near the end of that stay in Bangladesh he became aware of a change in the public mood about India. During a visit to Shantosh to see Maulana Bhashani, he asked the latter about it. The Maulana told him that the Indian army had taken away even ceiling fans from Bangladesh, and that had soured the public mood. Khushwant said to me "I was simply dumbfounded

hear it from the Maulana's lips, since after all very many Indians had laid down their lives to liberate Bangladesh from the Pakistanis. Now ceiling fans?" I looked at him. "I didn't say anything back to the Maulana," he responded. "Ceiling fans?" he said again, then shrugged and looked away. It was pleasant in that warm room.

People plainly ministered to him, hanging on his words. I was talking with an assistant editor of Outlook magazine I had met at a book launch previously when I became aware that it was getting close to 7:30. I rose to leave, but Khushwant waved me back down on the sofa. "Sit down," he murmured. "From Bangladesh. You are a two-Scotch guest. Have one more, and then you have to excuse this *buddha*, who goes to sleep early." I sat down again, was handed another drink and began talking with Rahul Singh, Khushwant's son, who himself is a writer and journalist based in Mumbai.

But what I was really thinking about was the Khushwant shrug and the 'ceiling fan' comment. No doubt it had rankled him that Bangladeshis could so quickly forget how much India had aided them in their liberation war. Had I not grown up in Pakistan, amid Sindhis, Pathans, Punjabis, UP migrants and Balochis, his comment and shrug would have passed me by - it had been so subtly understated. Though Khushwant was a committed liberal humanist, I wondered if the experience had reinforced ideas non-Bengali Indians have about excitable, fickle Bengalis. The real South Asia, despite political boundaries, is a collection of ethnic communities bound firmly in other ways, not the least in their collective unconscious about the Other. We Bongs do it too. Very frequently, in a 1971 liberation war story penned by a Bangladeshi, when the Pakistan Army is heading towards a town or neighbourhood, Bengalis run away screaming '*Paanjabi*

aitasay, Paanjabi aitasay.' But there were Baloch and Pathan regiments (not counting our homegrown Razakars), that did equal amounts of murder and rape. But in the construction of our grand liberation war narrative, the 'Paanjabi' stands for them all, for all the terror and barbarism of 1971. We South Asians do have an amazing diversity of languages and culture, but we can also be imprisoned within them, and even today it feels odd to think of English as our common linguistic link. And this is where I think that Khushwant's contribution is immense, in that while his deepest affection is for Urdu poetry, his unselfconscious, uncomplicated, uninhibited English writing, in a stream of books, magazines and columns, daily, weekly and monthly, demystified English, liberated it. In his hands English was a language like any other, to be used from writing the history of Sikhs to his wife's bathroom proclivities, from Indians having sex in train compartments to the horrors of communal violence. He made it declassé, de-Brahminized it. In Khushwant's world of English you can talk about anything, and not be particularly aware of the language.

"*Ilish*," Khushwant Singh asked me, "you guys still getting your *ilish*?" I told him that the haul this year had been particularly good. "The last time I was in Bangladesh, Hasna Moudud fed me the finest cooked hilsa fish I've ever eaten. It was very tasty." Where was Hasna now? he asked. "In London, as far as I know," I told him. He nodded, but ah, that hilsa! He almost smirked his lips. The *buddha* (old man), as he likes to call himself, is young in his responses and his conversation. In a recent answer to a question about afterlife, his first words were "That's bullshit." I told him that if he ever made it to Bangladesh again, I would get him some *ilish*, maybe not as tasty, but...

I had asked him how he now felt. "Still going at 92," he said, "I'm still writing every day." True. But now a lot of the material were now merely being brought out in his name, such as the latest two from Penguin, *Celebrating Urdu Poetry* (which contains his translations of Urdu poetry, something he has done on and off over the years), and *The Khushwant Singh Treasury* (which is a collection of his favourite prayers, poems and proverbs). The latter typically mixes Shakespeare sonnets with anonymous contributions:

The sexual life of the camel
Is stranger than anyone thinks
In the heat of passion
He tries to bugger the Sphinx.
But the Sphinx's rear orifice
Is full of the sand of the Nile
Which explains the hump on the camel
And the Sphinx's mysterious smile.

As I finished my second drink, the bluesuited Sikh, evidently on the hunt for yet another interview of the great man, moved in on Khushwant. But Lady Luck was not with him. With a noticeable scowl, Khushwant said, "Enough now, this *buddha* needs his rest. So goodnight." I shook his hand, thanked him for his courtesy, waved at Rahul and got out of the door along with the rest of the crowd.

A three-wheeler back to the IIC? I shuddered, but not due to the Delhi cold. A brisk walk would do me no harm. Pulling my muffler tighter across my throat, I set off, past the apartment complex gates, onto the footpath, and into the wide, grinning night.

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Letter from NEW YORK

HASAN FERDOUS

Tuesday

Yesterday, I learned that Shamsur Rahman was seriously ill. Doctors had already pronounced him clinically dead. Almost immediately I thought of Shahid Quadri. I wanted to share the news with him. During the past two years, Shamsur Rahman has been a constant fixture in every conversation I have had with him. But Monday is his dialysis day. Three times a week he visits the local dialysis centre and spends several hours there to flush out toxic waste from his blood and tissues. Dialysis is a painful and tiring process, and I did not want to depress him further.

I called him the next day. It was rather late at night. "Who told you? How bad is it? What's the latest? Why not send him abroad for better treatment?" He seemed almost out of breath. Even over the telephone, I could sense his anguish.

Shamsur Rahman is some ten years older than Shahid bhai, but this difference has never been a barrier between the two. They have known each other for over fifty years. Shahid bhai, sometimes misunderstood even by his close friends, has always considered Shamsur Rahman to be one of the best -- perhaps the very best -- among the living modern Bangla poets. The only other modern Bangla poet whose name lights up his face is Buddhadev Basu.

We spoke on the telephone. I could not see his face, but could still sense the gathering clouds in his eyes. Besieged by memories, he let a floodgate open up: snapshots tossed and tumbled one after another. He recalled, in 1954 -- or was it 1955? -- when he was a student at Dhaka's St. Gregory's High School, he first met Shamsur Rahman. Only recently they had moved to Dhaka from Calcutta, where his father edited the daily *Star of India* newspaper. Poetry was already an obsession and he devoured everything that came along his way. One day a common friend told him about Shamsur Rahman, who was already a minor celebrity in Dhaka, thanks to Buddhadev's monthly *Kobita* magazine that had published several of his poems. Rahman bhai lived in old Dhaka's Ashek Mahmud Lane; Shahid bhai at Bangla Bazaar, as a stone's throw away. The friend promised to introduce him to Rahman bhai. They met -- without any mediation -- a few weeks later at Khan Majlish's bookshop in Sadarghat, considered rather chic at that time. Literary magazine *Spondhon* had published a poem by Shahid bhai. At Khan Majlish's, he was re-reading his own poem. A few minutes later, a young man, fair and bespectacled, entered. They eyed each other for a while. Shamsur Rahman, the fair and bespectacled youth, spoke first. "Are you Shahid Quadri?"

That was the beginning. They chatted a while, later Shahid bhai invited him to old Dhaka's celebrated Riverview restaurant. He had in his pocket one silver rupee, a sumptuous amount no doubt. After tea, chocolate biscuit and some poetry, the two headed to Rahman bhai's home. There, Rahman bhai opened his poetry notebooks and read for two hours his unpublished poems. He even corrected printing errors in Shahid bhai's poem published in *Spondhon*.

Thursday

Shahid bhai lives in a high-rise cooperative apartment complex in Queens, not far from my *para*. During week-ends, we often gather at his place, mostly to hear him talk but also to enjoy Nira bhai's terrific *samosa* and *ghugnidana*. Today, around nine, my wife Ranu and I were the only guests. By 10:30 p.m., another six or seven people dropped in. Nira bhai poured more tea from her electric teapot and brought out more *ghugnidana* from her microwave oven. We all settled down.

Soon we returned to our conversation on Shamsur Rahman. The poet's death on 17 August had cast a deep shadow. In New York, an impromptu commemoration was organized where Shahid bhai spoke movingly.

Despite Shahid bhai's strong defense, I still harboured some misgivings about Shamsur Rahman's poetry. To me, Shamsur Rahman's poetry, especially those written during his "*Biddhasto Nilima*" phase,

reads almost like European poetry. His taxonomy, imagery and diction are very much European -- it sounds foreign and reads almost like those of Eliot, Yeats, Pound and Baudelaire. Ponder the image of the Jew flying over the Paris sky? Where did that come from? Even, his famous "*Bidrohi bornomala*" reminds one of the cataloguing of imagery made famous by Paul Eluard in his "*Liberte*."

In essence, I laid down the same line of argument that Mannan Syed had made forty years ago. Shahid bhai seemed to lose his patience. In older days, I have a feeling, he might have said "*khamosh*." Instead, like an old teacher dealing with an impertinent student, he said, "Listen, there is no poet -- none whatsoever -- who is not influenced by other poets, especially those who are great. Being influenced does not mean imitation." He recalled Eliot's famous essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*. Shahid bhai seemed to remember every word of that essay. "You can't separate the progress of literature, especially of poetry, without finding a comparison in the historical sense," Shahid bhai said, using Eliot's essay as his template.

In fact, Eliot had argued that following tradition did not mean a blind or timid adherence of the past successes. Imitating past traditions -- in other words, older masters -- never lasts long. He wrote, we have seen many such simple currents lost in the sand. Instead, tradition is a matter of much wider significance. Then Shahid bhai upped the ante. "Not just poetry, but in every branch of the arts, you will see clear influence of people, one over another. Each tradition contains many streams and they flow in many layers. Every artist belongs to some tradition in the narrow, geographical and historical sense. But in the broader aesthetic and historical sense, he borrows from other traditions. He draws not just inspiration but also food and nutrition for his own creative enrichment. Neither Tagore nor Jibanananda was immune to this. They too drew from foreign traditions, turned those into their own and enriched their creativity. Would you call them imitators, too?"

I could sense his annoyance. But I wasn't ready to give up provoking Shahid bhai. Isn't it true that Shamsur Rahman's best poetic years were before 1970, I said. His poetry later became loud, bore a pamphleteer's mark and was aimed at a fawning adolescent audience. Granted, Shamsur Rahman, who underwent a dramatic transformation after 1970, did produce a whole body of literature reflective of his time, and of its hope and anger. But he also wrote a great number of bad poems. He chose to become politically active, something that made him almost an activist. Shouldn't activism be anathema to a modern poet, I quipped.

Shahid bhai, his patience wearing thin, appeared a little listless. "Shamsur Rahman had written poems on many subjects. Politics is just one of those. He masterfully handled them all, including such themes as alienation and the crisis of identity. These are serious socio-political issues. Many of us could not even think of treating them convincingly. His poetry is sometimes imbued with a dark shadow, with a nihilistic mood, but if you read carefully, you can discover a profound belief in life and in the future. What you call activist poetry is actually his way of affirming life. If you call it politics, fine. But as far as I am concerned, I see in them a clear affirmation of life, and an urge not to give up."

Shahid bhai seemed to be just warming up, but Nira bhai sent a signal, only a small hint but broad enough for us to realize that it was time for us to pack up.

Saturday

Tonight we were at Jackson Heights, the heart of Bangla community in New York. It's a shoppers'



Shahid Quadri by the Atlantic in Salem, Massachusetts, 1995.

re-run of the last World Cup Cricket match between Bangladesh and India. We often call it, with unconcealed pride, "Bangla Town."

We were invited to a high school graduation party. When we entered, the party was already in full swing. Girls, mostly in deshi clothes, were touting their latest acquisitions. Bangla music was blaring and finger food was laid out. To my pleasant surprise, Shahid Bhai and Nira bhai were among the early guests. I sat next to him.

"What is the latest? How is Hasnat (Abul Hasnat, Editor, *Kali o Kolom*) doing these days?" he asked.

I updated him on the latest goings-on. Last week, Mullika Sengupta and Subodh Sarker were at Jackson Heights, they met with some of us in Muktaadhar, New York's popular Bangla bookstore. Subodh and Mullika, a husband-wife team, are famous poets from Calcutta. Shahid bhai appeared curious to know how the two were received. They were warmly applauded, I told him, but I personally did not find them particularly uplifting. Too loud for my aging ears. Mullika is crafty, more intent on building a poetic mood, but Subodh was more keen on messaging. I don't like poets who wear their politics on their sleeves.

Shahid bhai shook his head gently, indicating his disapproval. Poetry can be political, nothing wrong with that, he said. "What is important is whether they validate themselves as poetry or not." Think of Eluard, Lorca and Neruda. They all wrote poems on political themes. Those poems are terrific on their own merit. It is only incidental that they happen to be political in nature. "I don't agree with those who want poets to be busy with themselves alone." The sphere of poetry is much wider, he said.

What is this "sphere of poetry"? I asked him. Shahid bhai lightly tapped the dinner table. "All great poets aspire to relate themselves to their time and place in three layers. In the first layer, he explores his immediate space and time, his own private environment. In the next layer lie his country and the accompanying environment. And in the final layer rests the world and everything that comes with it." He paused for a moment, and then added, "No, not just the world, but the entire cosmos. Only a great poet is capable of expressing himself in all three layers, moving from a dot to become a circle."

I hesitated a bit, not fully convinced that it was for a poet to take on such multiple roles. A poet is not a historian, neither is he a prophet. "Aren't you asking a little too much from a poet?" I asked. If a poet considers the world to be his domain and starts prescribing dos and don'ts, that could pretty much be the end of poetry as we have known.

Shahid bhai reminded me of the history of poetry. "When I say a poet expresses himself in multiple layers, I only mean his effort to understand life in all its diversity and meanings. That's exactly what all great poets of the world have done. We recognize a poet as great only because he is capable of examining life and exploring its many meanings from various angles."

I realized later that when he used the word 'poet', he actually meant artists. He agreed that a poet's task is not making tall statements. The moment he, the poet, takes on the role of a political advocate, he pretty much relinquishes his objectivity. Shahid bhai cited the example of Bishnu Dey. He was a Marxist poet, who recognized the dark side of life, but also celebrated its glories. Think of T.S. Eliot and his

paradise. Dozens of Bangla grocery stores and restaurants line up the two sides of a large block about the size of Dhaka's New Market. Shops remain open late, sometimes all night, and people starving for a chat in Bangla and a taste of deshi food drive in from near and far. One can chew a masala pan, buy the latest Shahrukh Khan video and watch a

Wasteland, he said. Yes, the sense of boredom is the prevailing mood there. There is even a sense of horror. But doesn't the also invoke life's beauty and its grandeur, laying them out side by side? Like Eliot, a poet must explore life from inside and out, from its dark side and its bright, from what is exposed and what is not. Perhaps that was one weakness that Rabindranath suffered from. He rarely saw the dark side of life.

I saw the host of the party approaching us. He folded his hands and smiled from ear to ear. "Shahid bhai, please, you have to say a few words. Your name has already been announced." I could see Shahid bhai's eyes darkening and his mood souring. The last thing he wanted was to rise up and give a speech on the great significance of high school graduation.

I have heard this question asked many a times. The answer has always been the same: I have already said what I wanted to say. Why regurgitate? "If I could not say what I wanted to say in my three books, I won't be able to say it thirty more." He also has no undying love for his own body of work. "They are misdeeds of my youth, a result of my follies."

Mahub bhai fondly remembered the good old days spent in Dhaka. "Shahid was like an encyclopedia. He had read the latest books long before most of us knew their names. He could quote poets and philosophers, historians and politicians, as if he had a book of quotations hidden somewhere under his hand."

I don't know about the years spent in Boston, but the last three years that I have seen him from close quarters have been quite trying. The news of the kidney failures in October 2002 was like a bolt from the blue. The only hope rested with finding a transplant. Darkness suddenly closed in. But life has its own way of finding a balance. He had met Nira sometime ago in New York. That chance meeting soon matured into love and then into marriage. Nira proposed, come, move in with me in New York.

Shahid Quadri is now on a waiting list for kidney transplants.

"How come you don't write any more, Shahid?" Mahub bhai repeated his question. I don't hear his answer but know it all too well. When your weekly routine includes three days of kidney dialysis, poetry is perhaps the last thing on your mind. Yet, during the past years, he did write -- at least prepared the first drafts -- of quite a few poems. Some have been published, including one called "*Bibbroto songlap*" in *Kali o Kolom* two years ago. I could still detect the old Shahid Quadri in there -- his self-deprecation, dark sense of humor and austerity of words. When I first read it, I told him -- perhaps with mock sarcasm -- that it sounded like a feminist piece. Shahid bhai, never shy for words, looked sheepishly at his wife. Nira bhai let out a peal of laughter.

It was already way past midnight. Mahub bhai stood up. He has to go to Brooklyn, on the other side of the city. It is at least a two-hour ride by late night subway. Nira bhai, unprompted, came to his rescue. "Don't worry, I will drop you off." I looked at Shahid bhai. He nodded in approval, a pleasant smile warming his face. Mahub bhai, a little embarrassed but obviously relieved, first looked at Nira bhai and then at Shahid bhai. "Thank you," he said, tapping Shahid bhai on his shoulder.

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New Year Brainwave

after re-reading *The Tempest*
(for Ranjitda)

KAISER HAQ

- 'You give me fever' --
Madonna on the iPod
Pouring her heart out.
- Nursing a common cold,
I dwell on the
Phenomenology of real fevers,
- The mellow pleasures of
The low-grade sort --
Dry skin, mildly aching joints,
- Mind disengaged from action --
You could fancy yourself a Buddhist monk
Or yogi in placid samadhi;
- The irony of 'moderate' fever --
You move from chill
And tachycardia to stupor;
- And high-grade fever that guarantees
The high of delirium,
After which comes hyperpyrexia --
- And farewell hot tea in bed,
I ride a New Year brainwave:
- What if the peddlers of progress
Could equip welders of power
With an efficient
- Fever-inducing device?
For writers, artists, intellectuals,
Meditation-conducive 'low-grade',
- No more than 39°C or 102.2°F
Should work wonders,
And recalcitrant political activists
- Could be taught instant moderation
With moderate fever,
39-40°C or 102.2-104°F
- Jails could be dismantled
And criminals sentenced at home
To a term of 'high-grade',
- 39-42°C or 104-107.6°F
For capital crimes it's higher still.
The Global Mega-Power
- With its Mega-Fever machines
Could deal similarly with the whole world:
Revive Oriental spiritual traditions
- With a 'low-grade' pandemic, tame
Rogue states with a mega-dose of 'moderate',
Give terrorists a sharp taste of hyperpyrexia.
- A perfect solution
To mankind's ills,
Don't you think? Utopia!
- What is it you're saying?
Product of a febrile imagination?
So is every bleeding utopia, my friend.
- And now for another nice hot cuppa!

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