



■ The third edition of Khushwant Singh Litfest kicked off in Kasauli on Friday amid great fanfare. Various personalities were seen attending the sessions on the opening day of the fest, some of which included (clockwise) Surjit Singh Barnala; former governor of Punjab; author Shobha De and festival organiser Rahul Singh; delegates from the region; as well as Daman Singh, daughter of former prime minister Manmohan Singh and author of 'Strictly Personal- Manmohan'.

PHOTOS: SANJEEV SINGH/HT



# Vintage Khushwant Singh

AND THAT WAS THE TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH THE ETERNALLY CHARMING WHO COULD GIVE THE YOUNG ONES A RUN FOR THEIR MONEY

## GUEST COLUMN



SUCHITA MALIK

I met Khushwant Singh on January 26 at his house in Sujan Singh Park, New Delhi, when I went to inter-

view him in connection with my research project almost six years ago. The meeting was fixed about a week in advance when I received a phone call in the evening in response to my request for an interview.

"Can I talk to Suchita?" came a husky, suave but firm voice from the other end. "Yes, speaking." "Can I speak to Suche...eta? Speak a little louder. I am 93 years old and a little hard of hearing." "Sir, Sir!" I fumbled for words. "I am Khushwant Singh speaking. You asked

for an interview." "Yes... Good evening, sir... I am Suchita ... speaking sir," I was speechless.

"When do you want to come? What day is convenient to you? Tomorrow, day-after, or 26th evening since the traffic will be a little better then." "Sir, the convenience is yours. Yes, 26th will be fine." My tone was yet far from normal. "OK. January 26 at 6 pm, then," he said.

It was a long wait for me. It was perhaps the only day when I did not read the

papers in the morning since I had chosen to witness the live Republic Day Parade at India Gate. So I missed the news.

I reached Sujan Singh Park 10 minutes before six. The signboard near the door-bell had a warning, "Do not ring the bell unless expected."

Of course, I rang the bell and was shown in quickly. I entered the room a little subdued and hesitant but was warmly greeted by the radiant smile of my host.

There sat the legendary

Khushwant Singh, half reclining on the sofa chair by the side of a typical English fireplace. The otherwise dimly lit room was glowing with table lamps at the corners and exuded an earthy charm. On one side stood tall, wooden bookshelves lending a grim air of

sophistication and knowledge. Greeting me warmly, he at once put me at ease with his customary sense of good humour and courtesy. Clad in simple, warm clothes, he sat with a blanket wrapped around his legs to keep himself warm in the chilly, wintry Delhi evening.

The atmosphere was warm and casual and the interview was proceeding admirably well given his ready wit and a razor-sharp mind even at that age. And as the telephone interrupted our conversation a couple of

"Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be..." Well, how true it was for the one and only Khushwant Singh



## MING, INIMITABLE, VINTAGE KHUSHWANT SINGH IN GOOD CONDUCT, CHIVALRY OR ETIQUETTE

times, there came an unexpected remark from him, thrown in casually, "You know, they have given me the Padma Vibhushan today. That's why the telephone is ringing again and again. Let me put it off the hook for a while."

I was dumbstruck and rued having missed out on newspapers or TV news. All my congratulations were accepted with humility and modesty.

And that was the tête-à-tête with the eternally charming, inimitable, vin-

tage Khushwant Singh who could give the young ones a run for their money in good conduct, chivalry or etiquette. I also came to know that he had declined an invitation for the evening to keep my appointment. So much for the gracious generosity of the Sardar!

As I drove back home, my mind went back to Rabbi Ben Ezra, a poem by Robert Browning, where he said, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be..." Well, how true it was for the one and only Khushwant Singh!

# HITACHI