

## Bombay Diary by Anil Dharker

It was the strangest interview I have done. The subject was sitting in an arm chair, wrapped in a shawl and cap, though it was not really cold. The TV camera was whirring, the still photographer clicking away.

`What according to you, is your most memorable achievement,` I asked

`What?` said the subject.

`What, according to you, is your most memorable achievement?` I asked again, this time a bit louder.

`What?` said the subject.

`What, according to you, is your most memorable achievement?` I asked a third time, this time shouting at the top of my voice.

`I don't know.... I don't think I have really done anything,` he said

The subject was Khushwant Singh at his house in Delhi, a house his father built, like he built most of Delhi. Khushwant wears a hearing aid, but obviously it doesn't help much. What doesn't help at all if you are trying to interview someone, is that they are not particularly interested in talking about themselves.

(This reminds me of a much older interview. This was with Sunil Gavaskar in his playing days, when our team was just about to leave for Australia. **The Illustrated Weekly of India** had just put Gavaskar on the cover with the caption `Gavaskar : The Worst Ever Captain of India?`

We were on Doordarshan in its heyday of being the only TV channel, so we were assured marvellous ratings.

“Have you seen the **Weekly** story”, I asked

`Yes`, said Gavaskar

`Has it upset you` I asked

`No`, said Gavaskar

`Do you think such a story, coming on the eve of your departure, will have a demoralising effect on the team?`

`No,` said Gavaskar.

So it went on, the monosyllables from one side driving the other to desperation. In the years since then Gavaskar has found his tongue, and in fact has become one of the world's best cricket experts).

Khushwant, of course, was never short for words, but now at 98, age has slowed him down. I believe he played tennis every morning till the age of 90, and his weekly column --- syndicated to hundreds of publications all over the country -- was being written till just 3 months ago. Incidentally, that was a production in itself. He wrote it in longhand, it was then typed by an ancient secretary on an even more ancient typewriter in quadruplicate, after which it was collected by hand by four different agencies for dissemination through the (new fangled) medium of e-mail to its many recipients.

I was talking to him while presenting the **Landmark Literature Live! Lifetime Achievement Award** for 2013. Sir Mark Tully was there to present a shawl, while Sivaraman Balakrishnan of Landmark and I gave Khushwant a huge cut- out of the cheque and a silver plaque. Through it all, the venerable recipient of all this sat looking quite unimpressed, wondering what the fuss was about.

When it was all done, and the TV camera and reporters had left, Khushwant Singh's son Rahul, himself a formidable journalist of the old school, and I sat down for a drink in the living room. At 7 pm sharp, an old retainer -- and when I say old, I mean old -- started mixing another drink. "That's for my dad. Always at 7 sharp." I asked the old retainer how long he had been working there. "65 years," he said.

"65 years!?" I said. It was obviously a day for repetitions. "How old, then, are you?"

Apparently, he was 85 and had come into the household as a young man. And stayed there, mixing drinks, being boy, then man, then old man about the house.

Khushwant has always been a stickler for time. He may have created an impression of being a bit of a boozier, but his boozing was, paradoxically, a disciplined thing. You called him for dinner and he would say, I will come at 7, eat at 8, then leave. The party should go on, but without me.

Rahul told me the story of Rajiv Gandhi coming to Khushwant's house for Rahul's 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday. At 9 PM, Khushwant gave a moving speech about how he had known the entire Gandhi family and, starting from Indira, how every Gandhi had come home for a meal. "Rajiv, you were the only one who hadn't come, so I am glad you are here tonight." Khushwant then looked at his watch. "But, however, happy I am, it's 9 o'clock now, so it's time for me to sleep. Good night." Saying which he retired to his bedroom, leaving Rahul to pick up the pieces.