
KHUSHWANT SINGH'S NARRATION OF PERIOD OF LATER MUGHALS IN 'DELHI'

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ABSTRACT:

Khushwant Singh's Delhi is a novel of immaculate narration about a city which stands as a testimonial to various cultural, political, social, psychological and geographical weathering and has survived to be an important city of the world. The present paper discusses the period of later Mughals. The paper highlights the sad downfall of one of the greatest empires of the human civilization at the hands of great Persian warrior, Nadir Shah and subsequent stripping and plundering which haunted the city of Delhi. The focus holds importance because it talks about Delhi which earned the affluence and fame during the span of centuries, but required only day to be left bleeding, wounded and impoverished, in fact an experience worth mentioning in every historical record.

Khushwant Singh's novel *Delhi* powerfully presents the Post-Aurangzeb period of the Mughals. It mainly surveys the decline and fall of the Mughal Empire, along with other psychological and political facts of that phase, such as 'the fear in Aurangzeb about the disintegration of the empire after his death', the exploits and execution of the Sikh warrior, Banda Bairagi, and his followers, etc, etc. The novel, successfully, paints the life and rise of Nadir Shah, his motivation to invade India, the pre-occupation of the then Mughal emperor, Mohammed Shah Rangeela with wine and women, his utter indifference and impolitic advances to the warning of Nadir Shah, the chaotic state of faltering Mughal's empire, the dissidence and treachery of the nobles, march of Nadir Shah to Delhi; the unstrategic and foolish resistance put up by Mohammed Shah, his inevitable defeat at the hands of Nadir Shah and finally Nadir Shah's triumphant march to Delhi. *Delhi* portrays Nadir Shah's all round superiority, his mastery in handling of men and affairs, his amassing riches, his judicious grabbing of the Kohinoor and *Takht-e-Taoos*, and his ordering the general massacre of the people of Delhi that continued relentlessly. The plunder and plight of Delhi find faithful and vivid expression in the novel. Mistakes of Mohammed Shah and his incompetence are satisfactorily spotlighted. There is a detailed description of Nadir Shah's anti-infidel feelings, his indulgence in loot and cruelties and his return to his domain with unlimited spoil and bounty. The novel narrates the disturbances created by the gangs of Jats, Gurjars, Marathas and Rohillas. The exodus of people from Delhi in the wake of the invasion of Nadir Shah is artistically delineated. The scene of Delhi after the havoc affected by Nadir Shah is, picturesquely, painted. *Delhi*, minutely, peeps into the plots and intrigues rampant in the courts and palaces of the later Mughals. The reign of Mohammed Shah; the successors of Rangeela reduced to puppets in the hands of the powerful and contriving nobles; plots and murders becoming a common feature, the almost unending strife for succession, the wars for grabbing the throne, the participation of the mercenary Jat, Sikh, Maratha and Rohilla soldiers in these wars, the influence and interference of the Marathas in installing a King on the throne of Delhi, the tragic tale of the 'King of Cities' – Delhi, the appearance of Ahmed Shah Abdali on the scene of Delhi, his plunder of the Mughal capital, execution of the emperor Alamgir II, the succession of Shah Alam II, the Maratha – Abdali engagement on the fields of Panipat, Delhi after the onslaught of Abdali, the rise of the Sikhs to power, the threats of the Sikh, and the Marathas to capture and rule Delhi, intrigues and murder, havoc created by ill begotten Ghulam Qadir overshadowing the havoc caused by Nadir Shah, Abdali, Marathas, Jats and Sikhs, humiliation, deposition and blinding of Shah Alam II, and the details of the life and predicament of the last emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar – all these facts of the history of the Later

Mughals are diligently and carefully dealt with in Khushwant Singh's magnum opus on the Capital of India, Delhi.

Aurangzeb 'Alamgir' ruled the empire for almost fifty years. He feared the disintegration of the Mughal Empire after his death. He foresaw his sons' fighting among themselves for succession to the throne. It is said that with a view to avoid confrontation after his death, Aurangzeb, in his testament, divided the kingdom among his sons. Aurangzeb was a strict disciplinarian. He imprisoned his son Muazzam for betraying his trust. Of his five sons, the eldest had died in prison and the fourth in exile in a foreign land. Khushwant Singh shows Aurangzeb's imprisoning his son in Jail for betrayal and states in the words of Alamgir :

"We had reposed faith in our eldest-born Muazzam. Even he betrayed our trust during our victorious campaigns against Bijapur and Golaconda by treating with the enemy. We did not let our affection stand in the way of justice and had him put in prison and forbade him to either cut his hair or pare his nails or drink anything except water. We kept him in confinement for seven full years." (Singh 1981 : 161)

This fact of history is confirmed by the historians. The Cambridge Shorter History of India states that *"Shah Alam, imprisoned during the siege of Golaconda was not pardoned until 1685, when he was released and appointed to the government of the Punjab and Kabul"*. (Allan, Haig and Dodwell 1950:352)

Aurangzeb gave counsel to his three surviving sons through his final letter. These letter form an important part of the tragic history of Aurangzeb. Allan, Wolseley and Dodwell remark :

"His farewell letters to his sons are among the saddest historical documents; 'My father has left me', he writes to his second son, 'leaving but the skin and the husks behind it. All the soldiers are helpless, bewildered and perturbed lie me. I brought nothing with me' into the world, and I am taking from it but the fruits of my sins. I know not what punishment will befall me. Though I have a firm hope in God's grace, yet for my deeds, anxiety ever remains with me." (Allan, Haig and Dodwell 1950 : 35)

Khushwant Singh refers to these letters in his novel to bring out the fear of the disintegration of the empire in the dying emperor. Through Aurangzeb, he states:

"We thought it proper to address words of counsel to our errant son. To Azam we wrote : 'I came alone and I go as a stranger. I do not know who I am, or what I have been doing. The instant which has passed in power has left only sorrow behind it. I have not been the guardian and the protector of the empire. Life, so valuable, has been squandered in vain. God was in my heart, but I could not see Him. Life is transient, the past is gone and there is no hope for the future..... I fear for my salvation, I fear my punishment. I believe in God's bounty and mercy, but I am afraid because of what I have done...."

And to Kam Baksh "Soul of my soul.....I am going alone. I grieve for your helplessness; but what is the use? Every torment I have inflicted, every sin I have committed, every wrong I have done, I carry its consequences with me. Strange that I came into the world with nothing and now I am going away with the stupendous caravan of sin! Wherever I look I see only God I have sinned terribly and I do not know what punishment awaits me...." (Singh 1981: 162-3)

The letters of Aurangzeb regret the non-fulfillment of his mission in life. They give sound council to his feared warring sons. Aurangzeb lamented his failure to eliminate his foes. He felt despair at his incompetent sons. He, accurately, anticipated the fall of his empire after he sailed away from this world. Khuswant Singh expresses Aurangzeb's understanding of the coming events in the following words of emperor:

We saw the infidel Marathas, Rajputs, Jats and Sikhs rising in arms all over Hindustan. And we saw how feeble of mind and purpose were the progeny we were leaving behind us. We knew that after we were gone, the empire of the Mughals founded by Babar would begin to totter to its fall and only tumult remain....(Singh 1981: 163).

Through the letters and fears of Aurangzeb, Khushwant Singh abundantly makes it clear that the period of the later Mughals was destined to witness the decline and fall of the great empire. The following days were headed to be of trouble and turmoil, of danger and dejection and of wide unrest and insecurity.

Delhi also reflects upon the ravages worked by the self-styled Sikh Guru "Banda". This false Guru with 40,000 men at his command attacked and killed Wazir Khan, the governor, who had murdered Guru Govind Singh and his children. Sarhind became a scene of plunder and vengeance. The most terrible cruelties were perpetrated on the Mughal. Even women and children were not spared.

The Sikh devastation continued all over the contiguous lands and the Saharanpur and Meerut districts were ravaged. (Prasad 1994: 640)

Khushwant Singh in his '*Delhi*' refers to the cruelties done by Banda Bairagi during the reign of Bahadur Shah. In a bewildering vein, he looks critical of the deeds of Bairagi. Narrating the details of his conversation with Kamla, he states:

At Emperor Bahadur Shah's tomb I tell her about the execution of Banda Bairagi and 700 of his Sikh followers! He was ordered to kill his own child before they hacked him to pieces, limb by limb. (Singh 1981: 162-3)

Khushwant Singh states that Banda slaughtered the Muslims "*by the thousands before they caught him and his band. Those were savage times*". (Singh, 1981) Banda's exploits in 1710 are his havoc during the times of Bahadur Shah made a substantial dent in the Mughal Empire.

The post Aurangzeb history of the Mughals marks the decline and fall of the Mughal Empire: The war of succession after Aurangzeb, Bahadur Shah's accession to the throne (1707) and his death five years later in 1712, his son Muizuddin, ascending the throne in the name of Jahandar Shah for six months. Faruk Siyar's puppet reign for six years and the short-term reign of Rafiud-Daraite and Rafi-ud-daula for two and three months respectively, finally led to the reign of Mohammad Shah (1719-1748). He owned his reign to the Syeds. Khushwant Singh describes the momentous events of the long reign of Mohammed Shah in '*Delhi*'. The reign of Mohammed Shah witnessed the serious blow of a foreign invasion led by a powerful conqueror Nadir Shah. '*Delhi*' narrates the life of Nadir Shah in an artistic way. It refers to Nadir Shah's future conquests of four kingdoms in a masterly way. Through the words of Nadir Shah, the novel shows:

Many years ago, when we shepherded over father's flocks of goats, ate the bread of humility and slept on a Couch of sand, we had a dream. (Singh 1981: 168)

Nadir Shah believed that his dreams would give him four kingdoms. He knew that

Allah had destined us to rule over four domains. We were rulers of Isphahan and had become Padishah (Emperor) of Iran. Afghanistan would soon yield to us. What could the fourth kingdoms be save Hindustan? (Singh 1981: 168)

The Mughal court had become a home of wickedness, treachery and deception. The two important nobles of the Mughal Court – Nizam and Saadath Khan invited Nadir Shah to Delhi. Khushwant Singh states this fact of history in the words of Nadir Shah.

A few days later we received an invitation to come to Delhi. It was not from Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah, who was then seated on the throne of Mughals, but from two noblemen of his Court – Asaf Jah Nizam-ul Mulk.... (Singh 1981: 169)

Nadir Shah felt the wickedness and vileness of these nobles serving the Mughal emperor. He compares them with serpent and says:

And what could better describe men like Nazam-ul-Mulk and Saadath Khan who, while eating their master's salt, were plotting for his downfall than the vile serpent which crawls on the ground but is ever ready to bite the man who stands above it? (Singh 1981 : 169)

Mohammad Shah neglected the affair of the state. He did not respond to Nadir Shah's three envoys to Delhi asking him to direct the Mughal governor of Kabul to close the frontiers of that province to fugitives from Kandahar. Nadir Shah's letters to the emperor stirred no response. Mohammad Shah was sunk in indolence and debauchery. He folded with concubines. Growing licentiousness marked the imperial court. *Delhi* spotlights the libertine ways of the Mughal emperor, Mohammad Shah. Nadir Shah, emphasizing the annoying absorption of the Delhi emperor, states:

Reports of Mohammad Shah's profligacy had come to our ears from other quarters. It has been reported to us that he was seldom without a mistress in one arm and a glass of wine in the hand of the other. He was known as 'Rangeela', the colourful monarch. (Singh 1981: 170)

Khushwant Singh, in this novel, closely marks the march of Nadir Shah to India. After his conquest over the Russian and the Turks, Nadir Shah turned to Afghans. He captured Herat and Balkh. He, then, captured Kandahar, proceeded to Ghazni and soon afterwards took Kabul. *Delhi* shows this progress of Nadir Shah and states:

We took Kandhar and Ghazni and then the city of Kabul. The whole of Afghanistan which was nominally a part of the Mughal's domains, yielded to us. (Singh 1981: 170)

Nadir Shah by invading India followed the examples of Alexander, the Great and Mahmud Ghazni. One motive of this invasion may be the controversial invitation of Nazam-ul-Mulk and Saadath Khan. The wealth and resources of India might have tempted him. The utter indifference shown to his envoys and letters by the then emperor of Delhi might be another reason for Nadir Shah's march to Delhi. History shows that Nadir Shah had agreed to leave India after the battle of Karnal with an indemnity of twenty million rupees. He set out from Karnal to Delhi only after he was roused by Saadath Khan's alluring statement that he would get much more than merely twenty million rupees if he occupied Delhi. Khushwant Singh in his novel *Delhi* attributes another motive, essentially, a religious one, for Nadir Shah's march to India and Delhi. Nadir Shah in a carefully stated tone says:

By Hazrat Ali Murtaza we swear that excepting friendship and concern for religion we neither had, nor have, any other interest (Singh 1981: 170-1)

No response from Mohammad Shah did change the mind of Nadir Shah. Mohammad Shah's complete negligence of Nadir Shah's several letters led the latter to make intensive preparations for the invasion. On November 6, 1738 with the beating of kettle drums started the long march to Delhi. Khushwant Singh's novel *Delhi* furnishes the details of Nadir Shah's advances to Delhi. He describes Nadir's victorious entry into Lahore. The news of Nadir Shah's intention of invading India was received in Delhi with ridicule. His advances changed incredulity into panic.

Mohammed Shah made a desperate bid to summon all the provincial governors of Delhi with their contingents. There are conjectures that in an attempt to inflict a crushing defeat on Nadir Shah, Mohammad Shah invited the help of the Maratha chief, Baji Rao. The following letter of the Peshawa to his Palaji Jadin gives enough evidence to this conjecture:

I shall march to Northern India by regular stages. The Persian sovereign Tahmasp Quli has come to conquer the world. To Help Mohammed Shah I am sending the Malwa force under Malhar Rao Holkar, Ranuji Sindhai and (Udaji) Puar. It is a glory to this monarchy (i.e. the Maratha State) to help the emperor of Delhi at such a time. (Irvin 1971: 337)

Even the battle preparations of the rival camps have been reflected well in this novel. For instance, the huge army of the Mughal Emperor is expressed as follows:

"He had indeed come in great strength – upwards of 3, 00,000 men". (Singh 1981: 173)

The royal army encamped and awaited the enemy at Karnal:

"Where there was an abundance of water from Ali MAradan's Canal and the extensive plain around supplied opportunities for manoeuring large bodies of Cavalry." (Singh 1981: 173)

Khushwant Singh takes pain to describe these minute geographical and strtegeical details:

A few musket shots away the Mughal army was entrenched between the town of Karnal and the Canal named after one Ali Mardan Khan. (Singh 1981:173)

Burhan-ul-Mulk brought from Oudh a contingent of 30,000 horses to swell and strengthen the army. The large army and noble warriors however ran ineffective by the unfortunate decision and the lack of military art of the Mughal emperor. *Delhi* spotlights this fact of history when it shows that *"it was apparent that the Mughal was still a baby in the art of war."* (Singh 1981- 173)

The Mughal army lost the battle. It suffered an enormous loss. The estimate, however, differs from one historian to the other.

Of the Indian army 30,000 according to one account, 17,000, according to another, were slain, and the survivors took refuge in their fortified camp, where provisions soon ran short. (Allan, Haig and Dodwell 1950:362)

Khushwant Singh comes very close to the estimate of the historians and says that *"in a two-hour engagement, 20,000 of the enemy were killed and many more taken captive". (Singh 1981: 173)*

Nadir Shah decided to march to Delhi without any intention of taking the empire from the Mughal. Khushwant Singh's novel *'Delhi'* paints the fact of history in the words of Nadir Shah to the Mughhal Monarch in the following way:

We must proceed to Delhi, and remain there for some days until our army is refreshed and the compensation that Asaf Jah Nazam – ul – Mulk has agreed to is made to us. After that we shall leave you to look after your own affairs. (Singh 1981: 175)

Nadir Shah was lavishly welcomed. He declared protection to Delhitites if they behaved annoyed Nadir Shah. Referring to circumstances persuading Nadir Shah to order general massacre of the people of Delhi, the historian Anil Chandra Bannerjee remarks:

"A rumour spread by mischief – makers that Nadir Shah was dead caused a rising in the city and about 900 Persians were killed. The angry invader ordered a general massacre. The slain numbered 30,000 and a large part of the city was burnt. The killing stopped at the humble request of the emperor and all captives – numbering about 50,000 were set free". (Bannerjee 1983: 17) Rumours gripped Delhi. According to a report: *Nadir's solders and camp followers, mostly Turks, Kurds and Mongols, were wandering carelessly through the streets and bazaars of Dilhi as their King was in possession of the city. Suddenly, about four o'clock in the evening (Saturday 10th, March), some idle talkers and mischief makers started the rumour that Nadir Shah had been treacherously shot dead at the instigation of Mohammed Shah, by a Oalma a woman – guard of the palace when he was returning from his visit to the emperor. (Irvin 1971: 364-365)*

Lamentably, nobody cared to verify news:

by a visit to the palace though its gate was open and people were passing in and out on business (Irvin 1971:365)

This was a familiar stage – a device of the story-tellers of Delhi. The captive Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan was said to have formed a similar plot against Aurangzeb in Agra Fort. The details of the alleged murder of Nadir Shah varied in the popular mouth. A Mahratti new letter (Raj VI, No. 134) speaks of the following rumour reaching Aurangabad:

Nadir Shah breaking his oath faithlessly imprisoned the Emperor and his nobles though the pathans who had joined him urged him not to do it. At the time of Nadir's entrance into Dilhi there was a rising of the Pathans round him. Qasim Khan Pathan and his brother, who were waving peacock feather fans over Nadir and his Wazir on their " howdas, slew both of them with their daggers at the gate. (Irvin 1971: 365)

The rumour spread like wild fire. The hooligans and low people of the city armed themselves and attacked Persian soldiers and followers who ere strolling through the streets alone or in group of two or three. Their small number, their ignorance of the local language and their unfamiliarity with the by-ways of the city put them at a disadvantage. They were slain.

There is another version of the origin of the riots. It is credibly stated that:

Tahmasp Khan sent several Persian mounted military police (nasaqchi) to the granaries of the Paharganj) was ordering them to be opened and the price of corn fixes; that the corn – dealers not being satisfied with the rate, a mob assembled; Sayyid Niaz Khan and several other persons of distinction put themselves at their hand and slew the Persian horsemen, and hen the report was spread the Nadir had been murdered, which increased the tumult. (Irvin 1971: 366)

These different stories about the origin of the riot in the capital city find full expression in Khushwant Singh's 'Delhi'. Undoubtedly, the Delhities annoyed Nadir Shah. Khushwant Singh records the cause of annoyance through the lips of Nadir Shah:

We were informed that the natives had created a tumult at the Royal Mosque when the Imam was declaiming the Khutba in our name. Our officers brought reports that our Qazilbash bodyguards had been spat upon in the streets; women had thrown refuse on their heads prices from our Iranian soldiers than from own people. (Singh 1981: 182)

Delhi highlights the skirmishes and assassination at the Paharganj grain market origination the riots. Through the protagonist of these turbulent days, Nadir Shah, it says:

In the afternoon we received reports that our men who had one to buy provisions at a grain market called Paharganj, a musket shot to the west of Ajmeri Gate, had been assaulted. It was not our habit to lend ear to rumour. We sent a party of seven of our bodyguards to verify the facts. Only three of the seven were able to return; these three bore evidence of violence on their persons. They told us that the leaders of the rabble were two Pathans Niaz Khan and Shah Sawar Khan. (Singh 1981: 183)

Khushwant Singh presents the minutest details of these incidents with historical accuracy. He gives the names actually figuring in the official documents. The names of the leaders of the rioters, the Kotwal of Delhi who showed cordial courtesy to Nadir Shah and won the applause of the conqueror for his ready obedience, Lutfullah Saadaat Khan's treacherous ways, his humiliation at the hands of Nadir Shah and his

inability to raise the promised ransom for Nadir Shah, finally leading him to commit suicide by taking poison, Nadir Shah's actual passing through the streets of Delhi to see for himself what havoc the mischief-mongers had created, his final ordering of the general massacre-all these facts of history are faithfully depicted by the novelist in *Delhi*.

The rumour of Nadir Shah's death finds confirmation in Delhi in the narration of Nadir Shah:

We received a report that it was being openly said in the bazaars that we had been poisoned by Noor Bai and were on our deathbed. (Singh 1981: 183)

The historical accuracy maintained by Khushwant Singh in the depiction of incidents is amazing. The rioters renewed their mischievous campaign the following morning. Nadir Shah came out of the Red Fort to see and verify the killings of his soldiers. It is reported in Jahan Kusha that at sunrise on Sunday 11th March, the tumult broke out afresh. Nadir dressed himself in armour, mounted his horse and girt around the spearmen carrying daggers also, rode to the Golden Mosque of Roshan-ud-daula in the middle of Chandni Chowk, opposite the Police Station and close to the Jewel Marke. (Jahan Kusha / 357-8, as quoted in Irvin 1971: 367)

The misdemeanor of the people of Delhi enraged Nadir Shah. He himself became the object of attack. After the physical assessment of the situation, as Nadir Shah returned to the mosque of Roshan-ud-daula, some stones were thrown at him and an officer, by his side, was killed by a musket shot. (Bannerjee 1983: 363)

This incident is faithfully reported in Delhi in the following manner:

Filth and stones were hurled on us from the balconies of neighboring houses. Then somebody fired a gun. The bullet whizzed past us and hit over fly-whisk-bearer. The poor man fell on us; his blood poured over our tunic; he expired in our arms with a cry of anguish: *'Ya Allah!'* (Singh 1981: 185)

The massacre brought a great part of the city to ruins. The work of blood among the populace created havoc. The tale of the slain reached 30,000. A large part of the city was reduced to ashes. *Delhi* describes the scene of massacre truly:

Our soldiers slew everyman woman and child in Dariba and then set fire to the bazaar. (Singh 1981 : 186)

The historian, Anil Chandra Banerjee confirms it:

Nadir "*Shah carried with him immense booty : Cash amounting to more than thirty million sterling, jewels, valuable articles, 10,000 elephants, 7000 horses, and 10,000 camels.*" (Bannerjee 1983: 18)

Nadir's own historian says that his master carried off nearly nineteen million sterling in coined money. A Scottish writer holds that Nadir Shah carried off nearly a hundred and nineteen million in cash and kind. The treasure collected by the Persian invader, is described as being beyond computation and included the Peacock Throne, the jewels set in which valued at twenty million rupees.

A scrutiny of the details delineated in *Delhi* makes it abundantly clear that Khushwant Singh is very careful and cautious in adhering to events of history. He is very particular about the incidents, their historical authenticity, the places, the days and dates and the motives and circumstances leading to these happenings. The awareness of the novelist of the minute details is astonishing. *Delhi*, barring some fictional material, truly depicts the major events of the history of the later Mughals. The complete adherence of the novelist to the actual historical figures, their role, the places, days, time and action is bewildering. One wonders at the vast knowledge of Delhi, geography history and events of the author of *Delhi*. The novelist presents the history of the Nadir Shah's exploit in India in a very subtle, serious, sensible and historically accurate perspective.

Nadir Shah left behind him in Delhi utter starvation and poverty. He had squeezed imperial treasury. Such drain of wealth was without precedent in the history of India. Naturally, it had a very serious impact on the economy of the country.

Delhi realistically presents the scenes of complete destruction in the Mughal capital during the stay and after the departure of Nadir Shah.

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