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**KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS AS LEGEND MANIN INDIAN SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Great grandson of the great Urdu poet and social reformer Khwaja Altaf Husain 'Hali' poet laureate from the historic town of Panipat, Haryana, Abbas was born in 1914. He indicates the year of his birth and relationship with the poet in his usual pithy and humorous style thus in his autobiography: "I was born in 1914. My great ancestor was so disgusted by the looks of his of his new-born descendant that he died shortly afterwards." On his father's insistence Ahmad Abbas agreed to take the law degree on one condition: he would not pursue a career in law under any circumstances.

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He lives on in the minds and hearts of millions of people all over the world who have perused and relished his newspaper columns, read his books, seen his feature and documentary films, exulted at his film dialogues and marveled at his skill of film script and dialogue writing and his dramas.

Great grandson of the great Urdu poet and social reformer Khwaja Altaf Husain 'Hali' poet laureate from the historic town of Panipat, Haryana, Abbas was born in 1914. He indicates the year of his birth and relationship with the poet in his usual pithy and humorous style thus in his autobiography: "I was born in 1914. My great ancestor was so disgusted by the looks of his of his new-born descendant that he died shortly afterwards."

On his father's insistence Ahmad Abbas agreed to take the law degree on one condition: he would not pursue a career in law under any circumstances. He wanted to be a journalist. He began his professional life as a wielder of the pen in 1935 as an unpaid apprentice in Abdullah Brelvi's "Bombay Chronicle". Recalls Abbas, "My father gave me Rs. 500.00 ('that is all you will get' the father told his only son) and my mother gave me a packet of 'sattu' to overcome the pangs of hunger during the struggling days in Bombay. "When both were finished I 'threatened' my editor Abdullah Brelvi that I am returning to Panipat," he used to recall. "For what?" Brelvi Sahib asked. "To practice law because I cannot write on an empty stomach," came the reply. Immediately Abbas was appointed reporter and sub-editor on a 'princely' pay of Rs. 75.00 per month. Zamir Niazi, the chronicler of the press in Pakistan and its well known journalist (besides author of several books on the freedom of the press) describes K.A. Abbas as his "guru" at whose feet he learned the art of journalism and craft of protest against dominance and injustices in society.

In a career spanning over half a century Khwaja Sahib emerged on the Indian and global scene as a communicator of great repute. As journalist, film maker, short story writer, novelist, social and political commentator he was listened to with respect and attention by the masses. Abbas however chose to describe himself as an "omnibus personality." But that was something of a disadvantage, according to him. He once wrote, "The novelists look down upon me as a short story writer, while short-story writers condemn me as nothing more than a scribe. All of them would contemptuously say that I am no more than a stupid film-maker.

In August 1942 Abbas started writing his monumental novel 'Inquilab' in English but seven years later he had only completed 13 chapters of the book. When he finally completed the novel there was a struggle with the publishers who wanted the length to be reduced. In 1954 the book was translated and published in the former Soviet Union with a print-run of 90,000. A year later a German edition hit the book stalls there. Only thereafter a publisher in Bombay agreed to publish it in English after pruning it down by 150 pages and paid

Abbas Rs. 800 as royalty for the book. In 1976 a Hindi edition was published and a year later Abbas published the Urdu edition himself.

In 1982 Abbas wrote “The world is my village” which, according to him, is the sequel to Inqilab. In the Preface to Inqilab he writes, “Is it an autobiographical novel? This question has been asked of me several times...But as I have said before, I hope I will not be called a ba\*#\*d though I did study in Aligarh like Anwar, the central character, and spent my youthful years at the University. But beyond that Anwar has his own life and loves, adventures and misadventures. He is in search of his identity whereas I have an identity of my own”.

KAA’s short stories like those of his contemporaries were not without their fair share of controversies. Both “Ababeel” and “Ek Insaan ki Maut” caused a hue and cry not only the first time they were published, but every time they appeared in magazines. The latter, also published under the title “Sardar ji,” had the Sikhs up in arms and even dragged Abbas to the Allahabad High Court. Sarojini Naidu, Governor of United provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) called Abbas to her house and ordered him to read the story aloud to her. As he finished reading it he saw Sarojini Naidu wiping her tears with the pallu of her saree. After regaining composure she told the writer, “The story is very touching, but you are a fool! Is this the time (1948) to write such stories?” Abbas’ stories and dramas like his newspaper columns mirrored the lives and problems of the common man. The readers waited anxiously every Thursday all over the country, at newspaper stalls and railway stations, for Abbas’ “Last Page” first in Bombay Chronicle and later in the Blitz to know how Abbas interpreted a certain event in the country and the world. Some people tried to label Abbas as a communist or a socialist, but no label could apply to him because he nursed no hatred or jealousy with fellow humans which is a pre-condition for an ‘ism’ to succeed. Unlike most people, including his leftist contemporaries and friends Abbas had no lust for worldly possessions or honours. Neither did he nurse any ambitions. Just once admitted that he was a Nehruvian but hastened to add that Nehru was a politician and had to make compromises in life, while KAA had no such compunctions.

The trilogy of Indira Gandhi biographies (The Return of the Red Rose, That Woman: Her Seven Years in Power, Indira Gandhi: The Last Post) as well as biographies of Nikita Khrushchev and Yuri Gagarin and his autobiography “I am not an island” besides other novels written by him have been translated in a large number of Indian and European languages and command a wide readership all over the world. His short stories have been included in anthologies with those of Sadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai, Ahmed Nasim Qasmi, Rajinder Singh Bedi all of whom were his close and personal friends.

In 1973, in association with the Blitz National Forum, Abbas organized a grand 60th. Birthday celebrations in honour of Krishan Chander with the staging of the birthday boy’s play and presented a purse of Rs. 60,000 to the celebrated short-story writer. But the next year when Krishan wanted to do the same for Abbas and despite keeping the event under wraps the preparation leaked and KAA ordered him not to proceed as “I am active, alive and kicking”, much to the disappointment of all involved in the arrangement. As a film-maker the younger generation would recognize K.A.Abbas as the one who discovered superstar Amitabh Bachhan. His real talent manifested itself in the thirteen outstanding films he produced, which were praised worldwide for their thematic and artistic sophistication. Karlovy Vary or Berlin, Moscow or Santa Barbara in USA, Abbas won accolades everywhere his films were entered as entries. The journey from journalism to films carries an interesting tale. As film critic of the newspaper, he wrote critical reviews of films. Where he appreciated a film, like some of Shantaram’s he would devote an entire page to his review.

Film makers whose films did not find favour with the honest and straightforward critic would chide him that it is easy to criticize a creative effort but difficult to create one. That is when Abbas wrote the first film script, Naya Sansar, about an honest journalist who would not, proverbially speaking, sell his pen to the highest bidder or indeed at any price. The film starring Ashok Kumar was a runaway success and that is why when Abbas formed his own film company he named it Naya Sansar (New World). He wrote scripts of many more films, including most of films made by Raj Kapoor. He once described Raj Kapoor as the only film director “who was inspired not by a technically perfect screenplay but by a literary

scenario written like a novel with all characters and situations described in depth.” Abbas was a skilful and experienced ‘technician’ in this field. RK films biggest commercial success “Bobby” and biggest commercial flop “Mera Naam Joker” were created by Abbas fascicle pen. MNJ of course received critical acclaim from the discerning viewers.

If “Anhonee”, the first film produced by Abbas’ company Naya Sansar, was also the first film in India to feature a double role, Munna was the first film without songs. Abbas’ Dharti ke Lal produced in 1945 about the great Bengal famine preceded Satyajit Ray’s first epoch film ‘Pather Panchali’ by more than a decade. Dharti ke Lal is kept in the French Film Archives among the 100 best feature films made anywhere in the world. Pardesi was the first Indian film to be co-produced with a foreign film company (Mosfilms). When his films made money he shared his good fortune with his crew but when they bombed at the box office he took all the financial losses upon himself. He once confided that he took decades to meet the losses of Dharti ke Lal. When the viewers showed discontent over the fact that Munna had no songs Abbas sat outside at the box-office window to return the ticket money to whosoever wished to get the money returned. At end of the screening no one came to ask for refund and the ‘little’ film made (reasonably) ‘big’ money. When Shehar Aur Sapna won the President’s Gold Medal and a cash award Abbas shared the glory and the cash with his technicians and artists who had stood by him when he ran out of money during the making of the film. As Abbas went up to the podium to receive the Gold Medal from the President the other twelve ‘partners’ attired in spotlessly white dress stood up in the hall to share in the glory. Some years later the gold in the medal was given away in the marriage of a long-time domestic servant. He followed his principles with a single-mindedness that was unparalleled. (He believed that denial of worldly comforts, honours and recognition for him personally at the hands of an ungrateful society was a small price to pay for his high principles). He never owned a house, rarely a car or a hefty bank balance. Even at advanced age and physical discomfort he would travel by public bus or a train and only seldom take a taxi only if he was in a hurry to attend a meeting or a gathering he was supposed to address. He created a great impact on the audience in a speech spiced with pungent humour and a wealth of information collected through years of wide reading, deep probing and incisive writing. He inspired many a youth to adopt a meaningful life, but was impatient with the frequent question of aspiring film actors, “How can I be the next Amitabh Bachchan?”

Khawaja Sahib had an amazing stamina for work. He would get up early in the morning and after a brisk early morning walk or a short workout in the house he would pore over the news, books, and magazines or to complete his unfinished writing of the previous day. He once confided in his nephew and namesake that he had become a writing machine to churn out articles after articles only to be able to make enough money to pay the salaries of his typist-cum-secretary and ‘katib’ who reproduced his Urdu scripts to make them readable. Abbas was quite satisfied scribbling on the reverse of numerous cyclostyled newsletters received by him from foreign missions, film trade journals and others. There was no better recycling of paper because the junk was then converted into a journalistic and literary masterpiece. He enjoyed writing through the noise and din of children playing, the radio and television blaring because nothing diverted his concentration. “It motivates me as my mind wrestles with the disturbance of the society and strengthen my determination to fight it!”

Abbas was a large-hearted person and a humanist. He was generous to a fault and extended all kind of support to people in distress and need – moral, material; indeed whatever he owned. His house was always open as refuge for struggling youth. Recalls Snehlata Pradhan, an actor of yesteryears and a close friend of Abbas and his wife: “Whenever I visited Bombay I was a house guest with the Abbases. Each time I found a large number of his friends and companions staying in his modest flat on Shivaji Park and enjoying his hospitality. Dev Anand, Balraj Sahni, Prem Dhawan and many more were all there after perhaps a hectic day at the theatre or the studio.” A relative Captain Wasiq Hasan then a young navy officer recalls that when he asked ‘uncle’ Abbas where his car had gone he told him very reluctantly, “My friend Manmohan Sabir had to pay off a large debt. Since I did not have the money I gave him my car to sell and repay the loan.”

It was an unusual Will that Abbas left for posterity. "If you wish to meet me after I am gone just pick up one of the seventy odd books I wrote or view the films I have produced or written the script for. If you are not allergic to yellowing news-print then go to library and read any of the hundreds of thousands of columns I have written. I WILL BE THERE with you."

Third edition of the Lucknow Literature Carnival came to a close on Sunday amid an array of interactive sessions with writers, authors, poets and people from the theatre and music.

In a conversation with Atul Tiwari, Syeda Hameed, the author of 'The Last Page--Bread Beauty Revolution--Khwaja Ahmad Abbas' threw light on the secular progressive vision of the eminent writer and film director. Reading out his last piece, 'The Last Will and Testament of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas', Syeda Hameed said it was the writer's last wish his funeral pass by a Gandhi statue and his shroud bear 'The Last Pages' and 'Azaad Kalam'. He also said that if a meeting is held in his memory it should have representatives of all religious communities

The session 'Shiva to Ikshvaku' was the most popular event of the carnival. The new heartthrob of Indian literature in English, Amish Tripathi, in conversation with Surabhi Modi ferried the audience across the mythological journey of his books and talked about the beauty of India's cosmopolitan culture.

APJ Kalam Advantage India was a discussion about Ka lam's last piece of writing co authored by Srijan Pal Singh.

The cultural event ended with music and dance. Satya Saran took the audience through the musical journey of Jagjit Singh's soulful melodies, while 'From Kotha to Gramophone' was a beautiful ballet documenting the life of courtesans like Zohra Bai Ambalewali, Zareena Begum and Gauhar Jaan and a glimpse into the life of the unforgettable, Begum Akhtar.

#### Session on Meera's 'Hang Woman'

The session with Malayalam writer K R Meera, Ministhy S, Ambar Chatterjee, Piush Antony moderated by Roop Rekha Verma talked about the book 'Hang Woman' written by Meera. It talked about the protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick and her metamorphosis from a 22-year-old year to India's first woman executioner.

#### Shakespeare in a phiran

The session with scriptwriter Basharat Peer of 'Haider' fame revolved around how the conditions of Kashmir were intertwined within the film. Peer said that everything shown in the movie had been true except for actress Tabu's character turning into a suicide bomber.

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