

## Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* : A Dark and Dirty Truth of Partition

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**Abstract.** *Train to Pakistan* is Khushwant Singh's classic novel of an isolated village in Punjab that is plunged into an abyss of religious hatred and communal violence on the eve of partition of India into India and Pakistan. With its enduring themes of love, loyalty and the horrors of civil war, this remains Singh's most important work. This paper focuses upon how the novel brings out simply yet effectively the price paid in terms of lost lives, loss of property, displacement etc by Indians for their independence. The village of Mano Majra allegorically stands for India. The multiple responses of people reveal the responses of people in general. Singh tries to discover the true Indian response. Partition, though a historical and a political reality, Singh probes deep into the enormity of the situation and lends to it a human dimension. This novel gives vivid accounts of the massacres of Hindus and Muslims, especially on the border towns of India. Train loads of dead bodies used to arrive from Pakistan to border station of Atari. They were filled with corpses of men, women, children and oldies. On the bogies of those trains filled with corpses Pakistanis wrote – Gift to India from Pakistan. These events lead to mass killings of muslims in India. People were killed without mercy. Men were killed with swords and spears while their women and sisters and mothers and daughters were ruthlessly gang-raped and then their breasts were slashed with spears while their children were killed in front of them and women left to bleed to death. Similar was the fate of Hindus who were coming from Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in this insanity that followed in the communal riots of 1947. This novel is based on that dark staunch naked barbaric bitter and dirty truth of Indian independence, which we call DIVISION. After all, not everyone got what they wanted.

**Keywords :** National divide, violence of partition, communalism, Love as a redeeming force.

The partition of India has been one of the most traumatic experiences of our recent history. It disturbed the Indian psyche and also its social fabric. It brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history. Partition was and has remained a decisive event in India's social and political life, the reason being its volume and scope with regard to India. So, it was natural that it touched all and particularly the creative writers like Khushwant Singh. *Train to Pakistan* enjoys the distinction of being the first novel which is by far the best and the most powerful novel on partition of India. Here, truth meets fiction with stunning impact as Khushwant Singh recounts the trauma and tragedy of partition through the stories of his characters, stories that he, his family and friends themselves experienced or saw enacted before their eyes.

He evokes the peaceful and frightening phase before and after the partition of India and Pakistan.

The freedom of India from British rule in 1947 and the splitting of the country into Muslim dominated country of Pakistan and the Hindu dominated country of India, is the greatest event in the history of modern India. What should have been the joyful culmination of decades of anti-British struggle, became a shameful debacle as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs turned on each other in a fury of religious bigotry. The violence surrounding partition is the main subject of *Train to Pakistan*.

The writer recreates a tiny village in the Punjab countryside and its people during that fateful summer, when the flood of refugees and the inter-communal blood-letting from Bengal to the Northwest Frontier at last touches them; many ordinary men and women are bewildered, victimized and torn apart. The village, Mano Majra, is on the railway-line near where it crosses the swelling Sutlej, its inhabitants, mostly Sikh farmers and their muslim tenants have remained relatively untouched by the violence of the previous months. The village money lender, a Hindu, is murdered. Jugga, a roughneck Sikh and a clean shaven visitor, Iqbal Singh are rounded up, and the things change for the worse when an east-bound train, full of corpses, makes an unscheduled stop at Mano Majra.

There have been many stories of Hindu and Sikh refugees being killed as they fled their homes from what was now Pakistan, but the arrival of this train was the first such incident witnessed by the villagers. Mano Majra turns into a battlefield of conflicting loyalties which none can control. In the stirring climax, it is left to Jugga, the village gangster to redeem himself by saving many muslim lives.

The traumatic experience of the partition shook Khushwant Singh to the core of his being and the inhuman and savage killings of the innocent people envenomed his heart. The mortifying and spine chilling incidents of August 1947 had shaken the faith of people in the nobility of mankind. Khushwant Singh is also greatly disillusioned and his presumption regarding man and life is all shattered. The inner struggle and agony raging within him is brought about by Suja Alexander in her work "Personal Concerns Go Public In *Train to Pakistan*" :

The beliefs that Singh had cherished all his life were shattered. He had believed in innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country. . . He had believed that Indians were peace-loving and non-violent. . . After the experience of the autumn of 1947, he could no longer subscribe to these views... (Alexander 44)

While India achieved independence, the world had the chance to watch the rarest event in the history of nation, the birth of twins – India and Pakistan. It was a birth accompanied by strife and suffering. Zar, Zoru and Zameen (wealth, woman and land), all three so beloved to man were brutally violated. Almost ten million crossed a sketchy line drawn by a crumbling empire. Only half of them reached an alien land they were forced to call home. Migrating men used their women's odhnis to wrap up whatever they could salvage of their wealth - treasures accumulated over generations tied in three yards of cloth and ran in opposing directions. Hindus to the east, Muslims to the west. Mansions were deserted, acres left behind, families cut to half. The entire geography of a sub continent was soaked in blood.

As the novel opens, the very first sentence refers to the calamitous year of 1947. It was the time when the country which was in fetters for two hundred years, freed itself from the foreign yoke. The weather itself is symbolic of the complicated scenario, the newly born polity was confronting:

The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. . . . there was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins. (Singh 1)

As the division of the country is formally announced, communal riots overshadow the changes taking place in India. There are references to important cities like Calcutta which are lifelines of the country, brutally torn apart by the riots claiming lives of thousands of people. The country that should celebrate the newly won independence of its citizens has to mourn for their tragic deaths. In the border states of Bengal, Bihar there are people who are forced to abandon their homes to save their lives. Those who refuse to go are brutally murdered.

The refugees travelled on foot, in bullock-carts, trains and collided with swarms of muslims fleeing to Pakistan for safety, which for them is their promised land. Both the sides hold each other responsible for the destruction and bloodshed. But the novelist holds a true, impartial view:

The fact is that both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west: to Noakhali in East-Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus; to Bihar, where Hindus massacred Muslims. Mullahs roamed the Punjab and the Frontier-Province with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims killed in Bihar. (1–2)

The summer of 1947 brought in its wake migration of ten million people – Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs as the creation of new state of Pakistan was formally announced. Within a month or two, almost a million of them were dead. The winds of terrorism were blowing all over northern India. There were only a few places in the remote reaches of the frontier that were able to maintain peace. One of these places was the village of Mano Majra. It is a small village, close to the Indo-Pakistan border and serves as the setting of the novel. For centuries in this village, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs have loved each other as brothers and lived together in peace. But this tiny village becomes the target of communal conflict and violence generated by the partition:

Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of money lender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque... There are only about seventy families in Mano Majra, and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims, about equal in number... It is the local deity, the Deo to which all the villagers repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing. (2)

The villagers therefore, represent the true spirit of India and Deo, the local deity becomes the symbol of communal harmony who is worshipped by the whole village disregarding the religion, caste and creed. Before the partition, the life in Mano Majra remained unaffected by political events of the country. But the changes taking place in the country after independence affect the smooth lives of Mano Majrans as the village is caught in the whirlwind of partition. Mano Majra is located near Sutlej river. The river is symbolic of the smooth course of life in the village. It also stands for vitality which is reflected in the lives of Mano Majra as the village symbolises secular values of the nation.

One of the symbols of continuity of life is the railway-station of Mano Majra. In contrast to the village, which is a fixed point in space, the train is a symbol of movement. The train signifies groups of people heading towards various destinations. Train is also a symbol of machine age, leading to the increasing degree of dehumanisation. The villagers' activities are patterned according to the arrival and departure of the train and is the only source which links the village to the outer world. Trains therefore, serve as life-force for the villagers:

All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains. . . . the driver blows two long blasts of the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake. Crows begin to caw in the keekar trees. The mullah

at the mosque stands facing West towards Mecca and with his fingers in his ears cries in long sonorous notes, Allah-ho-Akbar. Then the priest at the Sikh temple intones his prayer. (3)

In the novel, the village is not presented as a place of perfect idyllic bliss. The peaceful life of the village is disrupted by the dacoits who murder the village moneylender Lala Ram Lal and loot him of all his property. Such violent incidents in the novel are a prelude to what is going to happen later on. It foreshadows the disaster that is soon to follow. Khushwant Singh observes, "The life in Mano Majra is stilled, save for the dogs barking at the trains that pass in the night. It had always been so, until the summer of 1947" (6). The words are a premonition of what will happen in the later course of the novel. At the time when the dacoity takes place, the hero of the novel, Juggut Singh has been to the fields to see his beloved Nooran, the daughter of the village Mullah, Imam Baksh. Their love is unconditional as it transcends the barriers of religion – a Muslim weaver girl and a Sikh boy. Later on, it is in the same village that the innocence of their love is shattered by the brutal and savage forces of partition. To the north of the railway bridge, is an officer's rest house where people of eminence, who come to Mano Majra, make a temporary stay. On one such morning before the dacoity, Hukum Chand, the district magistrate and deputy commissioner visits the place. He has been deployed there to avert any kind of communal trouble in the area. His conversation with the sub-inspector reveals the naked dance of death in the country immediately after partition:

God is merciful. We have escaped it so far. The convoys of dead Sikhs have been coming through at Amritsar. Not one person living! The Sikhs retaliated by attacking a muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses. They wrote on the engine, Gift to Pakistan. (20)

The delineation of all these changes taking place in the country show how the satanic and evil forces of enmity and hatred have replaced the moral and secular values of the nation. Even the politicians are busy playing mind games. They can do nothing for a changed and transformed polity like India. Their decision to divide the nation on religious lines was a tragic blunder. The novelist pokes a bitter satire on these demagogues by making the subinspector his mouthpiece, "What do the Gandhi caps in Delhi know about Punjab? They haven't had their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters raped and murdered in the streets". (22) The people who were entrusted with the task of maintaining peace, law and order were burning with the fire of communal hatred. The police and the higher administration was involved in

inflicting ruthless cruelties upon people in India and Pakistan. Ironically, the saviours were performing demonic acts that question the basic ethics and norms of humanism in India or the world in any decade or era.

It was on the morning after the dacoity that Iqbal Singh enters the village. He becomes the object of novelist's bitter sarcasm. He calls himself a social worker and has been sent there by his party to create awareness among villagers regarding partition of India, so as to prevent any kind of communal violence as Mano Majra is a vital place for refugee movements. He comes with the objective of reforming the simple villagers whom he finds uncivilised, but later on a ruffian like Jugga, whom he abhors turns out to be a better person who saves the values of humanity proving Iqbal Singh to be a self centred man and a perfect failure. Kamal Mehta in his essay "*Train to Pakistan* : A Study of the Partition and its impact on the People" says, "Iqbal is a nice satirical portraiture of the pseudo intellectual and the progressive elite class that criticizes all others but is itself impotent to contribute anything during the ordeal. . . ." (Mehta 27)

The fractured independence that India attained is of least importance to these villagers. Their views on newly attained independence of the country is an eye opener. " . . . Educated people will get jobs the English had. . . . we were slaves of the English; now we will be the slaves of educated Indians or the Pakistanis". (Singh 51) The analysis is indeed startling. The irony of the whole situation is that when India got independence, people were forcibly transported to new destinations and had to leave everything behind.

In the beginning, the peace loving inhabitants of the train-conscious Mano Majra were not at all affected by what happened in the country. They were ignorant of the rampant killing and bloodshed all over the north of the country. But it was in September that the things started changing in Mano Majra. It was one morning that a train from Pakistan arrived at Mano Majra railway station. The train had something ominous about it. It was not like any other train as its arrival created a standstill in Mano Majra. The train was obviously from Pakistan and it was carrying dead bodies of innocent people. There was a deadly silence in the village. Everyone had a hint of what the train was carrying. In the evening, the people went to the Gurudwara to seek solace.

The train which is a symbol of journey, of life, of connecting people from different places becomes a ghostly reality of dead being loaded from across the border as well as from both sides of divided Indian subcontinent. Sanity was rare at the time of partition. In the midst of mayhem, both Sikhs and Muslims prayed for peace and tranquility. That evening things changed in Mano Majra. Whatever happened cast its gloom over the entire village. No one remained unaffected whether he was a simple and religious man like the village mullah or a bureaucrat like Hukum Chand. Imam Baksh did not chant the prayers out of Holy Koran that day. In fact all the villagers had lost their peace of mind.

The entire Mano Majra was bleeding. Everybody was thinking of the bloodshed and violence that was spreading its tentacles over the entire village:

Muslims sat and moped in their houses. Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurthala, which they had heard and dismissed, came back to their minds. They had heard of gentle women having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. . . .(127)

Alok Bhalla puts it in these words in his “Stories About the Partition of India” :

The partition had broken the covenant that men must make with men, castes with castes, religion with other tolerant religions, without which our survival is precarious and our enslavement by the barbarian is certain. (Bhalla xi)

For every Muslim of Mano Majra, every Sikh was now a stranger with an evil intent. The atmosphere of love was now replaced by that of fear and suspicion. Muslims started recognising the Sikhs as their enemies since ages. To them, their beard and long hair as well as kirpan was something that was anti-Muslim. For the first time, the name Pakistan came to them as a heaven of refuge – A Promised Land for the Muslims, where there were no Sikhs. The Sikhs on the other hand, recollected the words of their Guru, “Never trust a Mussulman... what had they done to Sikhs? Executed two of their Gurus, assassinated another and butchered his infant children” (Singh 128).

The sadistic violence on the other side of the border had created clear cut divisions in the village. Though people of virtue and wisdom still trusted each other, but were hopeless in front of the decisions taken by the government of India. The muslims had no other option but to leave Mano Majra. Meet Singh assured Imam Baksh, “As long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you. We die first and then, you look after your selves” (133).

Partition, indeed, was a great human tragedy caused by politics of the day bringing in its wake untold miseries, sufferings and indignity to the affected men, women and children because they were uprooted savagely from their ancestral hearth and home, while warring communities on both sides were after their blood. The scar of partition had created a deep wedge between the two communities that rendered them helpless. The muslims of Mano Majra were taken to Chundunnugger refugee

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camp from where they will move to their new nation Pakistan. Sadly this change had occurred overnight.

By evening, Mano Majra had forgotten about the departure of its muslims and their attention was diverted by the rise in the level of river Sutlej. It seemed as if the river had been turned into a death-bed :

Its turbid water carried carts with the bloated  
carcasses of bulls still yoked to them. There were  
also men and women with their clothes clinging to  
their bodies. . . (150)

The Sutlej tragedy was thrown into background by another train loaded of corpses from Pakistan. The dead bodies had to be buried. So, a bulldozer arrived. Like a monster, it started eating up the earth, "The place looked like the scar of a healed up wound". (152)

The demonic forces of violence had been playing with the sentiments of innocent villagers. In the name of values taught by Sikhism, the fundamentalists in Mano Majra wanted to satisfy their violent instincts. In order to avenge the murder of those who were killed, these people wanted to kill innocent muslims of Mano Majra. It seemed as if they had lost their sanity and were acting like lunatics. Mali and four of his companions stepped over the threshold and promised each other to participate in this act wholeheartedly. The irony of the entire situation is that they were going to commit heinous crime of mass-murder in the name of god. Bharati A. Parikh in her critical work "*Train to Pakistan: Humanity at Stake*" says :

The novel sets the tone of forthcoming doom. The  
naked dance of death moves forward unabated. The  
puny politicians failed to gauge the devastating  
impact of horror and holocaust on the minds and  
lives of millions of citizens. . . The death lurks all  
around. . . (Parikh 67)

At that point of time, the diplomat Hukum Chand plays his trick and orders the sub-inspector to release both the prisoners – Juggut Singh and Iqbal Singh. His plan to release Jugga was to avert the tragedy that was going to leave its nasty mark forever on Mano Majra within a few hours. In a situation, where a diplomat failed to take any decision, the lover succeeded. It is his indulgence in Haseena, a prostitute that prompted him to release Jugga as he was aware of Jugga's love for Nooran, the muslim weaver girl.



When Jugga comes to know about evacuation of muslims from Mano Majra, his immediate concern is his beloved Nooran. He is a true valiant who has decided his course of life. Jugga goes to Gurudwara to pay obeisance to God before the final act. His prayers are different from the vows of the fundamentalists as the former comprises of piety and the latter is a sham. Though a ruffian, he proves to be a real hero in the end. The way morning brings hope, Jugga is the hope for humanity in his own way. He has now transcended his earthly character. He has conviction that by saving the innocent Muslims, he is going to do something good. Ironically, this illiterate and budmash rustic comes to represent the values ever honoured by India.

Juggut Singh's love is, indeed, a positive and dynamic force in the novel as it cuts across all the barriers. When the men with power and authority sulk in their chamber in indifference and inactivity, religious men and politicians recoil in fright and timidity, it is Jugga, the romantic deviant who boldly combats the forces of darkness and death. He sacrifices himself in an attempt to save his beloved, Nooran and consequently saves the lives of thousands of Mano Majran muslims targeted for massacre. His indomitable courage and unconquerable will averts the gloom of inhuman violence surrounding the village and marks him as the symbol of undying goodness, love and self sacrifice.

Khushwant Singh through this event compels us to consider what man has made of man. The peace loving people of Mano Majra are injected with the venom of communalism and egoism by the people in power only to further their own nest. His heroic death is a sacrifice that unmasks the hypocritical and Machiavellian civilized society. The freedom of the country was never a simple and peaceful process. It cost the lives of millions of people of undivided India. It showed incapability of the nationalist elite to bring a peaceful transfer of power. The rape of women, castration of men, loot, murder, arson, bloodshed – all were the instances of failure of patriarchal nation to protect the honour of its men and women.

In the end, it is the pure love of a Sikh boy Jugga and a muslim weaver girl Nooran which transcends all that is earthly and raises itself to eternity. The fanatics have planned to murder all the muslims of Mano Majra who are going to Pakistan by train. But the train is carrying Jugga's beloved Nooran. In order to save her life, he risks his own life and meets his tragic end.

It is his devotional love for Nooran which wins over the communal conspiracy of the fundamentalists. Jugga's selfless love for Nooran elevates itself over all the barriers of selfishness, greed, hatred or communal barriers of caste, creed, religion and reveals the failure of Hukum Chand as diplomat and Iqbal as socialist. Jugga's beloved Nooran, whom he will never be able to marry moves to Pakistan. His child growing in her womb is symbolic of moral earnestness which

the politicians, bureaucrats, socialists of that time lacked. The novelist with his acerbic prose effectively highlights the brutality of partition which brought for the people of Mano Majra separation, the people who had been living peacefully for centuries together.

*Train to Pakistan* is the story everyone wants to forget yet one cannot overlook this inevitable, inescapable stark reality of our past. When the nation was on the threshold of a new dawn, it also faced unprecedented destruction, bloodshed and trauma. Khushwant Singh has successfully delineated this unpleasant phase of our national history in the novel. He has presented Mano Majra as a microcosm of the communal temper of the country during the days of partition. It is the self sacrificing love of Jugga that breaks the rule of the jungle, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. On this battleground of Mano Majra, the forces of evil are vanquished by one of the forces of good, i.e. love.

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