

Train to Pakistan

Train to Pakistan is a semi-historical novel by Khushwant Singh published in 1956. He is India's best known writer and columnist. He is also the author of several books which include the novels *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, *The Company of Women*, *Burial at Sea* and the classic two-volume *A History of the Sikhs* and a number of translations and non-fiction books on Sikh religion and culture. His autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice* was published in 2008. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974. *Train to Pakistan* recounts the partition of India in Aug. 1947. Instead of depicting the partition in terms of only the political events surrounding it, Singh digs into a deep focus, providing a human dimension which brings to the event a sense of reality, horror and believability. Although the Partition does not mean much to the Sikhs and Muslims of Masr Majra, a village on the border of India and Pakistan.

The novel opens with the murder of a local money-lender and a suspicion falls upon Juggut Singh, the village gangster who is in love with a Muslim girl when a train arrives carrying the bodies of dead Sikhs, the village is transformed into a battle field, and neither the magistrate nor the police are able to stem the rising tide of violence.

"Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. we were slave of the

been here. So were our ancestors, we have lived amongst Sikhs as ^{dharmis}. After the Muslims leave to a refugee camp from where they will eventually go to Pakistan, a group of religious agitators comes to Mano Majra and instill in the local Sikhs a hatred for Muslims and convince a local gang to attempt mass murder as the Muslims leave on their train to Pakistan.

A more detailed social structure emerges. Government officials were corrupt, manipulative of villagers and could arrest anyone they chose for any reason, more often for their own benefit. They did just enough in terms of dealing with the dispute so that nobody could say that they didn't do anything. The law enforcement was completely at the whims of the local government meaning that in practice, there was no law. Small amounts of educated people trickled in and out of villages, trying to instill in people democratic, Communist or other western ideologies though the common people were turned off and confused by their unorthodoxy. When one such educated man was speaking to a villager about freedom, the villager ^{ex} complained that freedom is for the educated people.

In addition to give an understanding of human actions, Singh makes a background ^{metal} commentary which bubbles up through main

English, now we will be slaves of
the educated Indians - or the Pakistanis"

To understand the situation surrounding the partition of India, Singh provides information about both religions involved. The book sheds light on the various religious practices of both Sikhs and Muslims in rural India. Singh describes daily life for individuals from both practices. For example, Singh describes the practice of Prayer for Muslims. "The Mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the morning prayer. He has a quick wash, stands facing west towards Mecca and similarly the Priest at Sikh temple lies in bed till the mullah has called. Then he gets up, draws a bucket of water from the well in the temple courtyard, pours it over himself and intones his prayer."

In a relatively short book, the reader gets to know a lot of characters. Mano Majra, the fictional village on the border of Pakistan and India in which the story takes place is predominantly Muslim and Sikh. Villagers were in the dark about happenings of larger scope than the village outskirts, gaining much of their information through rumour and word of mouth. Upon learning that the govt. planning to transport Muslims from Mano Majra to Pakistan for their safety, Muslims said "what have we to do with Pakistan? we were

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start fighting, they fall right next to him and
be punished. The guilt he gets from not helping
is. Alcoholism is another tool. Hukam chand
used in attempt to clean his conscience. He feels
the guilt of his actions by day and belittles
them by night. The other two main characters
are Iqbal Singh and Juggut Singh. Iqbal is
described as slightly effeminate, well-educated
and atheist. Social worker from Britain who
thinks politically. Juggut is towering, muscular
and uneducated villager who places action over
thought and is known for frequent arrests
and gang problems. As if to warm them up for
comparison, they were both arrested for the same
murder they did not commit, and were placed in
adjacent cells. Upon their release, they learned that
a gang was planning to attack the train taking
Mandira's Muslim population to Pakistan. They
each had the potential to save the train, though
it was recognized that this would cost their lives.
Juggut, nevertheless, acts on instincts. After he
found out about the fiasco that was going on,
he then sacrifices his life to save the train. Iqbal
spends pages wondering to himself whether he
should do something, expounding a moral paradox on
the way. If there were people to see the act of self-
immolation... the sacrifice might be worth. For the
purpose known within one's self that one is in the
right: The bullet is neutral. It hits the good and the
bad, the important and the insignificant, without
distinction.

characters in their thoughts and their actions. Singh does not describe the politics of the partition in much detail. This is mostly because his purpose is to bring out the individual, human element and provide a social understanding, two aspects of historical events which tend to be either ignored or not effectively in texts. In the Partition, the major change was political. Britain's splitting of India into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The effect of change, however, was significant and as Singh has shown frighteningly, social and religious groups rearranged and clashed violently. Singh makes it clear that many people played a part in this chess. There was a sheer moral confusion which arises from trying to make sense of an event as momentous as partition.

In addition to giving an understanding of human actions and pointing out that everyone was responsible, Singh makes a background moral commentary through his characters. The most influential character is Hukum Chand who is the regional magistrate. It becomes apparent that he is a moral man. He is often described as a dirty physical appearance as he is overwhelmed with unclean actions and sins and is just as often trying to wash himself of them. His ethical issues are shown in one of repeated encounters, when Muslims and Sikhs