

# Theme of betrayal dominates new book on Makhan Singh

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A new book revisits the almost forgotten story of Makhan Singh, the 1913 born anti-colonial hero who played the most significant role in the establishment of trade unionism in Kenya, and who was detained by the colonial government in far-flung regions for over 10 years.

Overlooked after independence by the Jomo Kenyatta government, Makhan Singh spent his time with his family and wrote about the history of trade unionism in Kenya, only to die in 1973 before he could be properly recognised by the government.

The book, *Makhan Singh: A Revolutionary Kenyan Trade Unionist* (2015, Vita Books, London), edited by Shiraz Durrani, is divided into four parts that address various facets of Makhan Singh's life. Part 1 focuses on his struggles with and detentions by colonial governments in India and Kenya, his mobilisation skills that established respected trade unions, and his life of quiet reflections in post-independence Kenya, when the government not only neglected him, but also sought to banish his memory from the public.

Part 1 brings together papers by Singh's children and grandchildren, in

which they remember aspects of their patriarch's work and life. While these are written in simple, reflective tones, Shiraz Durrani's 'Reflections on Makhan Singh', is written in an academic manner and imbued with indignation at the way Singh was mistreated by both colonial and post-independence governments as a "dangerous" person who should be kept away from the public.

Part 2 offer snippets of Makhan Singh's own writings, with extracts of his autobiography, the leaflets that he authored and some of his poems.

Part 3 is a brief reflection on how Makhan Singh features in creative work, especially in the play *Mungu Comrade*, written by Atamjit, and Ranjodh Singh's review of the same play.

The last part, collates some of the famous quotes on and by Makhan Singh.

By its structure, tone and subject, *Makhan Singh: A Revolutionary Kenyan Trade Unionist* transcends generic boundaries to embrace aspects of the historical, biographic and journalistic writing, and thus complementing earlier works on Makhan Singh, such as Zarina Patel's *Unquiet: The Life & Times of Makhan Singh*.

While none of the contributors to

Durrani's book directly pose the big question regarding Singh's abandonment in post-independence era, all of them imply it: What was so difficult in acknowledging Makhan Singh's role in the struggle for independence and according him some recognition thereafter?

We can speculate about the reasons but, whatever the case, Makhan Singh's plight as captured in this book points to a specific moment in Kenya's history when leaders normalised a national culture of betrayal, avaricious greed and selfishness; when they belittled historical contributions of their comrades, placing themselves beneath any sense of fairness, honour and justice.

With hindsight, we now know at least two things that are dealt with in Shiraz Durrani's book. One, that the casualties in the struggle for independence were not only the likes of Dedan Kimathi, who gave their lives for us, but also the survivors of colonial machineries and who, post-independence, chose to stay the course of their ideals. Some of these were Makhan Singh, Pio Gama Pinto, Chege Kibachia, Bildad Kaggia and Oginga Odinga. Their ideological steadfastness embarrassed the ruling class who had vacillated in word and deed, turning into tyrants whose in-

tolerance for divergent opinions was meant to facilitate their own greed for land and other material properties.

Indeed, the systemic neglect of Makhan Singh was because he had shown, during the era of late colonialism, that he could see through all the divisive strategies that the colonial government deployed in keeping Africans from mobilizing around a common course. When he advocated for non-racial and non-religious workers union, Shiraz Durrani writes, he had introduced into the anti-colonial discourse ideas and ideals that could neither be broken nor compromised because they were beyond the reach of colonial violence.

As Durrani suggests, Makhan Singh's advocacy for merging political and economic struggles for independence during colonial times and his dignified silence after independence empowered him with moral superiority that made him be viewed as a threat to the Jomo Kenyatta regime that then turned away from him in guilt.

Singh had introduced a new set of vocabulary in the struggle for independence — capitalists, workers, comrades — that reoriented the people's understanding of their material situation, even after independence. All these,

Durrani suggests, were partly responsible for the cynicism with which the Jomo regime, after the colonial one, viewed Makhan Singh.

Ultimately, the take-home messages that one may glean from this book, are, firstly, that it will be upon the common people, especially those to whom history is an experience first before it becomes a discipline, to fight and keep certain memories alive. Shameful to the rest of us as it is, this seems to have been the realisation that Makhan Singh's family and close friends came to when they embarked on the project that led to the birth of this book.

Secondly, the book signals that what the colonial regime started by way of alienating consistent thinkers and actors opposed to them was well completed by the post-independence regimes.

It was this behaviour, densely implied in Durrani's book, that Frantz Fanon captured in *The Wretched of the Earth* in which, while examining impediments to the birth of a national culture, declared that 'each generation must, out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.'

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