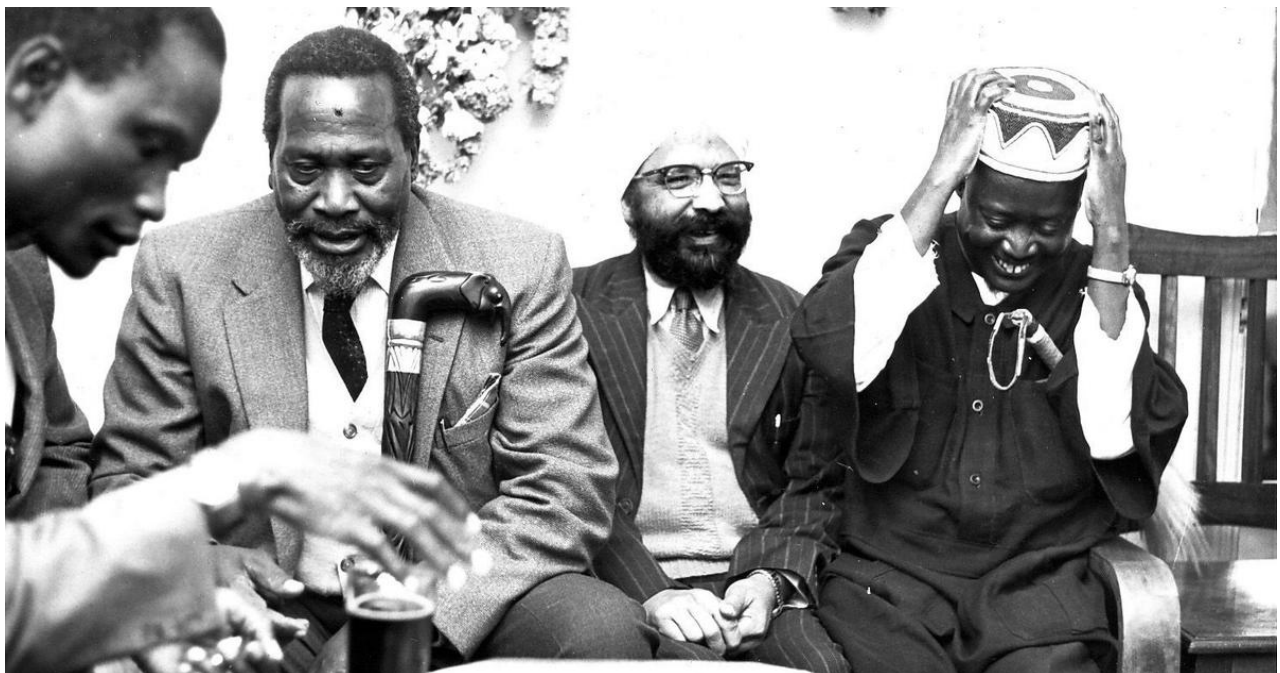


Makhan Singh: The Punjabi radical who fought for freedom in not one but two countries

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Arko Dasgupta



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In 1950, Makhan Singh did something unprecedented. In the month of April, the Punjabi radical who had spearheaded the trade union movement in Kenya gave a call in Nairobi for *Uhuru Sasa*, a Kiswahili expression meaning *Freedom Now*. For the first time, someone had commanded the British to grant complete independence to their territories in East Africa.

Singh was soon arrested for being an “undesirable person” under the Deportation (Immigrant British Subjects) Ordinance of 1949. The arrest was not wholly unexpected. He had been orchestrating boycotts and strikes for a while, even before his call for freedom. His defence that his actions were “justified in the circumstances” was a show of defiance. Singh spent the next 11 years in detention, being moved from one facility to another. His son Hindpal Jabbal writes that during this time his father was not permitted any visitors, barring close family.

Singh’s inspired story is notable at all times, but especially during the ongoing pandemic. This health emergency has reminded us of the miserable state of political leadership in large parts of the world where callousness is the norm and kindness the exception. That being so, it is almost an obligation to commit ourselves to a fearless and more compassionate politics, like Singh did.

Makhan Singh, recognising the apathy of the colonising British, devoted himself to opposing injustice in both the land of his birth and his adopted home. Singh’s determination to lay the basis for a more just politics in India and Kenya is inspiring and encourages us to imagine morally and ethically defensible futures.



Makhan Singh, Nairobi, 1947. Credit: Amarjit Chandan Archive/Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain]

Segregated Lives

Makhan Singh was born in December 1913 and spent most of his boyhood in undivided Punjab. When he was six, his father, like many Punjabis in his time, moved to Kenya to work for the railways. Around the age of 14, Singh joined his father, along with his mother and sister, in the new country. By this time, his father had left the railways and was

running a printing press, though not full-time. Singh began helping him at the press after his school-leaving examination. It was around this time that he developed an interest in trade unionism. Before long, he organised a labour strike against the printing industry, including his own father who had employed him.

The Indian community enjoyed a unique position in British Kenya. While the colonial model limited social interaction between Africans and Indians, writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes that Indians had made an unmistakable impression in every sphere of Kenyan life, including food, language and politics. Unlike Indians in the Caribbean, it was possible for Indians in East Africa to return to India anytime and they were never truly disconnected from the Subcontinent. But as historian Sana Aiyar reminds us, colonial East African society was politically and racially segregated with Europeans at the apex, Africans at the bottom and Indians caught in the middle.

This arrangement made it incredibly difficult for Indians and Africans to put up a united front against their colonial overlords, leading as they were segregated lives with limited contact. Indians in British-ruled Kenya, consequently, spoke primarily for themselves and Africans likewise expressed their own narrow interests. What Singh managed to do was transcend this colour line and make common cause with the African population of Kenya to take on the British.



Makhan Singh (sitting, third from left). Credit: Amarjit Chandan Archive/Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain]

The Indian Trade Union was formed in 1934 and Singh elected its secretary not long after, in March 1935. Soon, Singh convinced his nearly 500 fellow unionists to change the name of their association to the Labour Trade Union of Kenya and open membership to all, regardless of race. Singh's action at both a basic, semantic level and a broader, organizational level signalled his intent to break free of the political and racial narrowness of daily life in colonial Kenya. To this end, biographer Nazmi Durrani says, the union published its handouts in Kiswahili besides Punjabi, Gujarati and Urdu. This encourages us to believe that Singh's inclusion of Africans in his trade union activities was not merely symbolic and that he was determined to reach out to as wide a swathe of subjugated races as possible.

Successful strikes on behalf of railway workers and those in other industries followed and the union grew to also include members in neighbouring Uganda and Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania). The Indian Trade Union, which had been renamed the Labour Trade Union of Kenya, was now the Labour Trade Union of East Africa.

In December 1939, Makhan Singh left for India to, in his words, "study working class conditions and functioning of the Trade Unionism in Bombay and Ahmedabad." Once there, he busied himself with anticolonial activities like addressing mass meetings of strikers in Bombay and attending, as an African delegate, the Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress. The next summer, Singh was arrested on the orders of the colonial government and, despite not being charged, moved from one prison to another for the next two years. Even after his release, Singh's movement was restricted to his native village in Gujranwala for two and a half years. Finally, in January 1945, he was set free. Wasting no time, he took up work as a sub-editor at *Jang-i-Azadi*, the weekly published by the Punjab Committee of the Communist Party.



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Singh left for Kenya in early August 1947, content in the knowledge that one of his main aims in life – the liberation of India – was in the offing. The second goal – the independence of East Africa – was still a decade and a half away. No sooner did he arrive in Nairobi than the colonial regime tried to unsuccessfully deport him for the radical campaigns he had undertaken in the mid-to-late 1930s. The British took him to be a “life-long fanatical Communist” but sought comfort in the belief that “in the circumstances of Kenya today, it [was] unlikely that a non-African, however fanatical, would emerge as a leader capable of stirring up the masses”.

Singh of course did not share the racialised worldview of his colonisers and returned to the anticolonial movement in Kenya. Among other things, he organised the Kenya Youth Conference; became active again in the workings of the East African Indian National Congress; and served as the general secretary of the East African Trade Union Congress, with the African revolutionary Fred Kubai as its president. This was, it is worth remembering, “the period when the trade union movement was synonymous with the political struggle”. All along, he encouraged Indians to work in concert with Africans and advanced such progressive suggestions as the setting up of common schools and Kenya’s Punjabis and Gujaratis learning “the language of the people – Swahili”.

It was after Singh was detained for the last time by the colonial government in 1950 that the Mau Mau Uprising broke out. He was freed in 1961, after the British lifted the state of emergency imposed in response to the anticolonial revolt. Once released, Singh, predictably and publicly, reaffirmed his Communist beliefs and resolved to continue his politics and trade unionism. Moreover, he aired his support for Jomo Kenyatta, who would go on to become independent Kenya's first head of government. Before freedom arrived in 1963, Singh joined Kenyatta's Kenya African National Union once membership became open to all races. Shortly after, he was granted permanent residency in the country.

In the annals of 20th century anticolonialism, Makhan Singh's name remains an example of someone who humbled and helped overthrow the British in not one but two nationalist movements. He recognised how pivotal it was to challenge the politics of indifference and segregation, securing his place in the firmament of great men like Mohandas Gandhi, Jomo Kenyatta and Nelson Mandela.

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