

MASHUJAA · NAIROBI · 1950

MAKHAN SINGH

*Eleven Years in the Desert
for Kenya's Freedom*



FIRST TO SAY IT. ELEVEN YEARS IN THE DESERT.

GRAHAM KASINDO

MAKHAN SINGH



M A S H U J A A

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G R A H A M K A S I N D O

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“He never owed anybody any money; he never took a penny for his work in the trade union movement.”

— Hindpal Singh Jabbal, on his father

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Prologue

KALOLENI HALL, NAIROBI. 1950.

The hall was full. On the platform sat the leaders of Kenya's workers, of the Kenya African Union and of the East African Indian National Congress, Africans and Indians together, which in colonial Nairobi was itself unusual.

One of the speakers was a Sikh in his thirties. He was the general secretary of the East African Trade Union Congress. His name was **Makhan Singh**.

Kenyan politicians had been asking the British for more: more land, more seats, more rights. Makhan Singh asked for everything.

Uhuru sasa. Freedom now. Complete independence for the peoples of East Africa.

It was, by the accounts of historians, the first time anyone had publicly demanded that the British hand over full independence to their East African territories.

Within weeks, he was under arrest.

He would not be free again for eleven years.

CHAPTER ONE

The Boy from Gharjakh

Makhan Singh was born on **27 December 1913**, in the village of **Gharjakh**, in the Gujranwala district of the Punjab, in British India. The village is now in Pakistan.

His father, **Sudh Singh Jabbal**, left for Kenya in **1920**, one of the thousands of Punjabis who came to East Africa in the years of the railway. He worked on the railways, and later owned a printing press.

In **1927**, when Makhan was thirteen or fourteen, he came to Nairobi with his mother and sister to join him.

He went to the Government High School, and in **1931** he passed the London Matriculation examination. Then he went to work in his father's press.

The press printed things for the working people of Nairobi. It was there that he found his cause.

CHAPTER TWO

All Races

NAIROBI. 1935.

In **March 1935**, Makhan Singh, twenty-one years old, was elected secretary of the **Indian Trade Union**. It had nearly five hundred members.

He made one change that mattered more than any other. He opened the union to workers of **all races**. The Indian Trade Union became the **Labour Trade Union of Kenya**, and then of East Africa.

In a colony built on separating Europeans, Asians and Africans, it was a radical idea. He printed the union's handouts in **Kiswahili, Punjabi, Gujarati** and **Urdu**.

The union fought for wages, and won. According to one account, it won rises of fifteen to twenty-five per cent.

The colonial government noticed. One official file described him as a "life-long fanatical Communist."

CHAPTER THREE

The Other Prison

INDIA. 1939–1947.

At the end of **1939**, with the Second World War beginning, Makhan Singh left for India.

He said he was going to study trade unions in Bombay and Ahmedabad. According to another account, he left to avoid arrest in Kenya after a strike of thousands of workers at Mombasa.

In India, he was arrested in **1940** and held for about two years without charge, and then confined to his home village under restrictions until **January 1945**. The accounts differ on the exact dates.

When he was free, he worked as a sub-editor on *Jang-i-Azadi*, a Communist weekly whose name means “War of Independence.”

He saw India win its freedom in 1947.

Then he went back to Kenya to help win it there.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Congress

NAIROBI. 22 AUGUST 1947.

He came back to Nairobi in **August 1947**.

In **1949**, he and the African trade unionist **Fred Kubai** founded the **East African Trade Union Congress**. Kubai was its president. Makhan Singh was its general secretary.

It brought together African and Asian workers in one organisation. And it began to talk about more than wages.

Makhan Singh worked to bring Kenya's African and Indian political movements together: the **Kenya African Union** and the **East African Indian National Congress**. In 1950 they held a joint meeting at Kaloleni.

CHAPTER FIVE

Uhuru Sasa

KALOLENI HALL, NAIROBI. 1950.

The accounts differ on the date. Some sources say **23 April 1950**; others say **May Day** that year.

What they agree on is what he said.

He called for *Uhuru sasa*: freedom now. Not self-government someday, not a few more seats on the Legislative Council, but complete independence for the peoples of East Africa.

The chant spread across the country.

CHAPTER SIX

The Arrest

NAIROBI. 15 MAY 1950.

On **15 May 1950**, Makhan Singh was arrested. So was Fred Kubai.

He was charged, and he was tried. According to one account, he was acquitted at trial, defended by the lawyer **Chanan Singh**. It made no difference. The government used a law it had passed only the year before, the **Deportation (Immigrant British Subjects) Ordinance of 1949**, to hold him anyway.

On **6 August 1950**, the government banned his union.

And Makhan Singh was sent north, to the desert.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lokitaung

TURKANA. 1950–1953.

They took him to **Lokitaung**, in the far north-west, near the border with Ethiopia and Sudan.

It was one of the most remote places in Kenya. Two years later, it would also hold Jomo Kenyatta and the other Kapenguria prisoners.

Makhan Singh was held there for about **three years**. According to accounts of his detention, he was kept largely in isolation. His family's visits were closely controlled. He was denied access to lawyers. What he could read was censored.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maralal

MARALAL AND DOL DOL. 1953–1961.

From Lokitaung, he was moved to **Maralal**, in Samburu, where he spent about **seven years**. Then to **Dol Dol**, near Nanyuki, for about a year.

Over and over, the British offered him a way out. He could go free, they said, if he agreed to leave East Africa and go back to India.

He refused.

The Mau Mau war came and went. Kenyatta and the Kapenguria Six were released. And still Makhan Singh was held.

He was released in **October 1961**. By one account, he was the last of the political detainees to be freed.

He had been held for eleven years, some say eleven and a half. It has been described as the longest political detention in Kenya's history.

CHAPTER NINE

The Outsider

Kenya became independent in December 1963.

Makhan Singh joined Kenyatta's party, **KANU**. According to one account, he was the first non-African to do so. He was given permanent residence in the country he had spent eleven years in prison for.

But there was no place for him in the new Kenya's government. He was too radical, too closely linked to the left, for Kenyatta's cabinet. He was not nominated to Parliament. He was given no job.

He did what he could. He wrote the history of the movement he had helped to build, including *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement* to 1952. He served as secretary of the Historical Association of Kenya.

CHAPTER TEN

Sh350

NAIROBI. 18 MAY 1973.

Makhan Singh died on **18 May 1973**, of a heart attack, at the Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi. He was fifty-nine.

According to his family, he left **Sh350** in savings.

“He never owed anybody any money,” his son, **Hindpal Singh Jabbal**, said. “He never took a penny for his work in the trade union movement.”

Epilogue

Kaloleni. Today.

Kenya's history of independence is usually told as the story of Kenyatta, Kimathi and the Mau Mau.

Makhan Singh is rarely in it.

He was born in the Punjab. He came to Kenya as a boy. He was the first to stand up in public and demand complete freedom for East Africa. He spent eleven years in the same northern prisons as Kenyatta, and refused every offer to buy his freedom by leaving the country.

When freedom came, it had little room for him. He died with Sh350 to his name.

Uhuru sasa, he said. Freedom now.

It took thirteen more years. He didn't give up on it for a single one of them.

THE RECORD

NAME	Makhan Singh
BORN	27 December 1913, Gharjakh, Punjab
CAME TO KENYA	1927, aged 13–14
UNION	Opened the Indian Trade Union to all races, 1935
CONGRESS	East African Trade Union Congress, 1949, with Fred Kubai
THE CALL	<i>Uhuru sasa</i> : complete independence, Kaloleni, 1950
ARRESTED	15 May 1950
DETAINED	Lokitaung, Maralal, Dol Dol; 11 years
RELEASED	October 1961
DIED	18 May 1973; savings: Sh350

First to say it. Eleven years in the desert.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

LIPA NA M-PESA	
PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*