

State, Law, and Lawlessness: Failure of the Governance in Train to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research paper scrutinizes the negligence of the government and failure of law in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan. The novel is set during the Partition of India in 1947, the novel accentuates the collapse of government authority and how frail administration, political decisions, and sectarianism led to extensive violence and widespread lawlessness. The study focuses on the collapse of government authority, the misuse of police power, the impotence of the state to protect innocent citizens, the decline of humanity, and the irresponsibility of society during Partition of India. Jugga's sacrifice stands in contrast to failure of state law and his sacrifice is a symbol of moral law and human conscience. The paper also investigates how riots and violence supersede state control and how average citizens suffer due to political negligence. This research paper uses a thematic and textual analysis of the novel. Therefore Train to Pakistan is a strong criticism of failed law, negligence of government, irresponsible leadership and irresponsible act of society.

Introduction

Khushwant Singh was born as Khushal Singh in Hadali, Punjab Province, British India, which is now in Punjab, Pakistan. He had witnessed the Partition of India and its violence, slaughter, sectarian strife, rape and mass migration. His work Train to Pakistan mirrors every aspect of the Partition of India-one of the most violent episodes in South Asian history and through this novel Singh paints the authentic picture of horrors of Partition,

but in a very skilful manner he bestows upon us the ground realities and failure of governance which obliquely adds fuel to the fire of Partition. The character of Hukum Chand, who was the magistrate and deputy commissioner and his inability to save people and his powerlessness in preventing the massacre convey the failure of governance and this culminates in chaos and brutality. "Why had he let the girl go back to Chundunnugger? Hukum Chand slid off his chair, covered his face with his arms and started to cry. Then he

raised his face to the sky and began to pray” (Singh 188). The lines reveal Hukum Chand’s helplessness. The narrative shows that when the state fails to maintain law and order, ordinary people are left vulnerable to fear and violence. This paper contends that Train to Pakistan imparted the failure of governance during Partition, demonstrating how failure of state law stimulates lawlessness, moral disintegration and horrors of Partition.

Historical Context and the role of the State

India achieved its freedom at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, while half of India was celebrating its freedom, the other half was facing the consequences of Partition. As Bhisham Sahni writes in his memoir, *Today’s Pasts: A Memoir*: “The Indian flag was flying instead of the Union Jack on government buildings, at police stations, and crossings, which made one feel that the nation really had become independent. At the same time, I also saw the crowd of refugees on the streets. On the one hand, there was a celebratory mood, but on the other was the misery of the homeless” (Bhisham Sahni).

India’s independence was marred by the tragic events of Partition. The abrupt withdrawal of British authority left freshly independent India and Pakistan inadequate to cope with the aftermath of

Partition. Bhisham Sahni’s memoir vividly reveals the failure of governance during the Partition and how abruptly the decision was made. Sahni recalls that the announcement that Pakistan was going to be created, the news came without any preparation and clarity, leaving ordinary citizens shocked and confused. He says, “this hurt me deeply. It was unexpected. There was no news of this” (Sahni’s *Today’s Pasts: A Memoir*). Sahni’s personal feelings stand as a powerful testimony to the collapse of government during Partition of India.

In the novel *Train to Pakistan*, Singh tries to demonstrate this vacuum of governance. The fictional village of Mano Majra, becomes a microcosm of India, in Mano Majra different religious communities lived in tranquility and uninfluenced by the Partition and its violence, “the only remaining oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra” (Singh 02).

The tranquility of Mano Majra was shattered by the chaos of Partition, and this chaos was introduced by the administrative failure. Any state’s failure is initiated by its impotence to anticipate the consequences of hasty Partition and the state failure is also initiated when the state fails to provide adequate protection to

vulnerable communities. Through the novel Singh repeatedly encapsulates the impotence of state institutions; the police fail to put an end to violence or even minimize the aftermath of Partition, whereas the police focused more on the baseless situations. The police and political figures are either absent or ineffective when violence erupts. When Lambardara and few villagers saw the dead bodies coming through the arches of the bridge, one of them told to inform the police then the other man mockingly said, “Police? What will they do? Write a first information report?” (Singh 151). The lines represent the helplessness of villagers and failure of state authority.

Singh very efficiently uses his characters to display the failure of state, Hukum Chand’s absence from the vulnerable situation and the Subinspector’s plotting with the head constable to frame Iqbal and torture Juggut shows impotence of police and state failure. The subinspector’s statement, “there are many Iqbals. I am talking of a Mohammed Iqbal, you are thinking of Iqbal Singh. Mohammed Iqbal can be a member of the Muslim League” (Singh 113). This statement of subinspector shows his adamant behaviour which works not on evidence but on his impulse and bias, Juggut was jailed for no real crime and Iqbal was arrested because the state needs

a scapegoat. This shows the collapse of legal institutions and a failure of state.

The forced migration of Muslim community from Mano Majra reveals how the state was incapable and failed to protect its own citizens. Muslim community of Mano Majra evacuated their homes and packed their belongings to move to a new land they even left some of their belongings in the hope of returning back unaware of the fact that they won’t be able to see their neighbours again and they won’t be able to return to their real home. This was the reality of many commoners during the Partition. Through the people of Mano Majra Singh draws the picture of innocent people who had to face the brutal consequences of Partition because the government failed to uphold the society, people and nation together.

When Malli and his gang was plotting to attack on the train which was carrying Muslims to Pakistan and when Hukum Chand came to know about this conspiracy he said, “well, Inspector Sahib, let them kill.... Let everyone kill. Just ask for help from other stations and keep a record of messages you send. We must be able to prove that we did our best to stop them” (Singh 163). This declaration by Hukum Chand assert the ethical failure of the state.

Communalism and Lawlessness

Communalism one of the central themes of the novel, defined as an extreme allegiance to one's own religious group, triggers the collapse of social law and order. The British Government sowed the seeds of divide and rule and later sectarian strife was seen as one of the main drivers of Partition of India ultimately culminated in one of the most violent and brutal mass killings, mass displacement, arson, abductions, rape, and destruction of the entire nation. When governance and law enforcement are weak and people lose their faith in government, state and law's ability to protect them, then people revert to self-support mechanisms often culminate into violence against perceived "others".

Mano Majra lived peacefully, in initial time the shadows of Partition violence did not reach the village. However when "villagers discovered that the train had brought a full load of corpses" (Singh 124), and when villagers got the news of massacres elsewhere, it ignited the fear and hatred in villagers' minds. In this situation the first and foremost priority of any government and state would be to impose law and order and execute it peacefully with less to no casualties, nevertheless the state- that is the police and the magistrate thought of their

personal profit and turned communal at such a crucial moment.

The decisions of the state supported the chaos of Partition and added fuel to the fire of sectarian strife. Instead of enforcing law the state supported lawlessness. The sub-inspector's support to communalism, "that is the only way to stop killings on the other side. Man for man, woman for woman, child for child" (Singh 21), when he came to know that the Sikh community attacked the Muslim refuge train. His further statements such as "God alone knows what I would have done to these Pakistanis if I were not a government servant" (Singh 23) exhibits his communist ideologies and his hatred towards other religion.

Through the character of sub-inspector, Singh wants to convey the message of state failure during the crucial time of a nation and due to irresponsible behaviour of a state, lawlessness increases in a society and citizens of the society. When the police and magistrate take abrupt decision commoners had to survive and face the consequences. Failure of a state is a miniature form of failure of a governance. The decision of Partition was rushed and the government took this decision and never considered the ground level reality, the law was enforced but it was poorly implemented.

Reflection on Governance and Human Responsibility

The novel depicts the situation of ordinary humans and the moral dilemma they had to deal with when the government fails to protect them. The ordinary people's thoughts are like a pendulum, having too and fro motions between cruelty and compassion. The tranquil village of Mano Majra, where Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs once lived in harmony and with love, their love for each other got shattered and the villagers started to pour hatred toward the Muslim community and the reason was "they are Muslims" (Singh 131). The dilemma of villagers between cruelty and compassion is apparent in the novel when villagers could not decide whether to give shelter to refugees or to ask their Muslim friends to leave the village, "the peasants thought about their problem. They could not refuse shelter to refugees: hospitality was not a pastime but a sacred duty when those who sought it were homeless. Could they ask their Muslims to go? Quite emphatically not" (Singh 132).

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is not only a political critic but also an ethical one. Singh through this novel asserts that governance is not only about policies, law, state, and institutions but also about the collective will of society to uphold justice and humanity at the

crucial moment of the nation. The government failed to accomplish this and the government appeared weak when the Muslim community was forcefully evacuated. The Muslims were sobbing and crying because they could not understand what they did wrong to leave their birth place; the place where their ancestors were born and lived, from the character of Imam Baksh Singh conveys the pain of many common people who had to leave their birth place because they belonged to a certain community which was acceptable either in India or in Pakistan.

Imam Baksh put forwards the pain of many common people by saying, "what have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers" (Singh 133). The government could have stopped this forceful evacuation but government failed to do so and few people took charge into their hand and for the sake of humanity according to a few villagers, they started planning to kill Muslim community to take revenge for what has happened to the Sikh community in Pakistan. During Partition humans forgot humanity, morality, and human responsibility of being a human. The train from Pakistan carried innocent humans but in India only dead bodies reached and the following lines clearly give the picture of brutality

during Partition and collapse of law and humanity:

“They were murdered. An old peasant with a grey beard lay flat on the water. His arms were stretched out as if he had been crucified. His mouth was wide open and showed his toothless gums, his eyes were covered with film... A child’s head butted into old man’s armpit. There was a hole in its back...some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, many women breasts were slashed” (Singh 151).

Failure of governance is not only because of state, law, and lawlessness but also because of irresponsible act by the society. The hatred towards other community was baseless and few people brain was fogged with the thought of violence and the reason they had for their brutality that they are taking revenge for what happened with Sikhs and Hindus community on the other side of Radcliffe line. The moral decline and the irresponsible act of society was put forward by Singh in his novel and this also leads to the failure of governance. Singh paints the picture of 1947 society, which was easy to manipulate and lay out hatred. In the novel a teenager boy influenced the people of Mano Majra for violence and brutality through his inflammatory speech.

The people of Mano Majra got so much influenced by a boy in his teens that

they even forgot that they were also agreeing to kill those people who were like their own family. The inflammatory speech of boy included hatred, violence and revenge he said:

“for each Hindu or Sikh they kill, kill two Mussulmans. For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. For each home they loot, loot two. For each trainload of dead they send over, send two across. For each road convoy that is attacked, attack two” (Singh 157).

Through the novel Singh captured every aspect of government failure, with all other reasons of government failure during Partition of India, the ethical lapse of society, the corruption, the moral decline, the lawlessness and the transgression of society was also one of the major causes of failure of governance during Partition of India.

However the society did not lost all its touch from humanity, the character like Jugga was ray of hope for humanity during the darkness of Partition, he was a criminal by law but a moral hero by action. At the end of the novel Jugga sacrifices his life to save the Muslims travelling on the train, “the train went over him, and went on to Pakistan” (Singh 190). During the chaos of Partition where everyone was thirsty for each other’s blood, Jugga did not had a second thought and he sacrificed his life. On the other hand, character like Iqbal

represents the people who only boast but when there is time for action they fail to do so, according to Iqbal, “if there were people to see the act of self-immolation, as on cinema screen, the sacrifice might be worth while: a moral lesson might be conveyed” (Singh 179). Therefore the novel not only talks about the failure of government but also the failure of people to uphold human responsibility.

Fiction and Historical Reality

Though *Train to Pakistan* is a fictional story but it mirrors the real historical failures during Partition. Historical data confirms widespread administrative breakdown, delayed troop developments, and failure to control mass migration and violence. Many historians commented on the failure of governance during Partition of India even writers such as Urvashi Butalia in her seminal work *The Other Side of Silence*, argue ‘how the government and political leadership failed to anticipate and respond effectively to the monumental human cost and violence’ (Butalia). Hence Singh’s novel is not just a fictional portrayal, it reveals that the lack of clear legal authority and bureaucratic paralysis worsened the communal confrontation. The comparison between fictional story and documented history highlights a crucial point that literature can often revealed the emotional depth, the

moral truths and fatal consequences of a historical event that is often overlooked by official records.

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* poignantly demonstrates the collapse of state authority and legal order and failure of governance eventuate into lawlessness and chaos into society during one of India’s most turbulent periods in its history. The study reasserts that the novel *Train to Pakistan* presents the Partition of India as a period marked by administrative collapse, where state fails to protect its citizens and uphold justice. The paper analyzed how the absence and failure of governance give rise to violence, moral breakdown of society, riots and fear. Characters like Hukum Chand emblemize a corrupt and bewildered administration and on other hand Sub-inspector arresting Jugga symbolize the misuse of state power and the train carrying dead bodies symbolizes and villagers getting influenced to attack the train and to take revenge symbolizes the lawlessness of society and breakdown of law and order during Partition.

The direct relationship between failure of governance and human suffering, make the study significant. Singh’s keen observation of failure of governance during the Partition of India very efficiently depicted in his novel and the novel’s depiction of lawlessness goes

beyond a historical moment and offers a universal warning about the dangers of state failure and reminds that when government and state fail to act and implement the law effectively, the society falls into a chaos, injustice and violence.

This research is limited to textual and thematic analysis of the novel *Train to Pakistan*, it does not include the comparative study with other Partition novel or historical document. Future research may focus on exploring comparative study of Partition novels and representation of government, state authority and lawlessness during Partition of India within the novel. In conclusion, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* vigorously illustrates that the failure of state and governance conclude not only the breakdown of law but also the loss of humanity. Through the realistic representation of Partition of India, the novel act as a continuing reminder that law, justice, responsibility and moral courage are indispensable for the survival of any civilized society.

Works Cited

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