

Review - Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972

Written by Darren Atkinson

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By: Kamran Asdar Ali

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Since the founding of the state amidst the ashes of the partition of British India, Pakistan appears to have gone through various iterations as it vacillates between direct Army rule and chaotic parliamentary democracy. The contested nature of the very idea of “Pakistan” and its place in the world has led to most scholarship to focus on the machinations of the ruling elites, their position *vis-à-vis* the politics of the Cold War and the fraught relationship with India. First coming to the fore as a result of the 1980s jihad against the Moscow-backed government of Afghanistan, but most pertinently after 9/11, the focus has shifted and Pakistan has been recalibrated within the spectrum of “Af-Pak”. As a result, Pakistan has often been referred to in the popular press as either the preeminent nexus of terror or, more dramatically, on the brink of imminent collapse.[1]

In a literature teeming with texts focused on the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalism, scholars have avoided assessing the trajectory of Pakistan through the history of class struggle. *Communism in Pakistan*, an important and literate book, written by Kamran Asdar Ali, provides an excellent starting point that presents something of a forgotten history; one that problematizes focus of much scholarship on Pakistan. The book provides superb documentary evidence based on ‘...oral testimonies, ethnographic fieldwork and archival research’ and is built upon detailed knowledge of Urdu literature as well as the personal reflections of participants which enable Asdar Ali to construct a revised form of historical knowledge that differs significantly from existing elite-level, Western-centric and security-focused studies (p. 18).

Asdar Ali bookends his work with an introduction and epilogue that show how the text is informed by an overarching concern with the struggle for cultural and linguistic rights within the narrative of Pakistan. Most explicitly this is highlighted through discussing the oppression and violence meted out to Bengali nationalists in East Pakistan by the military of West Pakistan in the early 1970s. Asdar Ali shows how these crimes been erased from Pakistani history in a process he sees as analogous with Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s insights into how certain parts of the past can be silenced through the historical method (pp. 200-205).[2] Throughout the book, Asdar Ali makes the case for the importance of removing the ‘...national amnesia of Pakistan’ which can begin to be addressed through examining the story of those who ‘...irrespective of errors in their analysis and the political mistakes...selflessly dedicated their lives to creating a world that would be better for all’ (p. 15).

The book is split into two parts with Part One (chapters two, three and four) being centred on examining the period leading up to and during the legal existence of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) from 1948 to 1954. It begins by examining the historical base of the CPP and presents its intellectual and organisational roots as a direct successor of the Communist Party of India (CPI). It reflects on the political difficulties and ideological debates that shaped the CPI’s decision to accept the formation of Pakistan as a potential “progressive homeland” for South Asian Muslims.

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In Chapter Two, Asadar Ali reflects on the formation of the CPP as seen through the biographical history of its first General Secretary, Sajjad Zaheer (1905-1973). Charting a course of clandestine political machinations, this chapter suffers somewhat from its exclusive focus on one individual, which comes at the expense of a wider discussion on class antagonism and the building of the CPP, although it makes up for this with its rich detail and historical flavour (pp. 49-85). Chapter Three tackles the idea of communism in Pakistan through the Urdu literature of the period, most notably the work of Zaheer, Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Mohammad Hasan Askari, and shows the many ways that partition and the creation of Pakistan created 'deep ambivalence about the continuity of what till then was a shared heritage for many North Indian intellectuals' (p.91). Finally, Chapter Four provides a detailed look at the Pakistani state's persecution of the CPP, the imprisonment of intellectuals and the eventual banning of the party in 1954 which led to the further retreat of communists to the political margins (pp. 114-143).

Part Two (chapters five and six), focuses on two events: the life and death of famed CPP activist and martyr Hasan Nasir and the labour struggle in Karachi in 1972. These events have been chosen in order to widen the scope of the book through bringing into the analysis '...other perspectives, especially those of women and working-class men, who have been constantly left out of discussions on the labour movement and progressive politics' (p.17).

Chapter Five begins by printing two letters that show the turmoil of Hasan Nasir and his loved ones over the arrest that would eventually lead to his death while in custody. Fragments of Nasir's life are placed together to present a human subject that shows how the motive of progress and justice motivated politicised individuals to leave India, where they were born and raised, and move to Pakistan where the struggle would continue amongst, as Nasir is reported to have said, the 'labourers I have lived with, learnt from and taught socialism to' (p. 151). Chapter Six brings the story forward to 1972 when the Pakistan People's Party, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, came to power with the support of many on the Left. Loaded with documentary evidence and quotes from workers and women, this chapter shows the multifaceted nature of working class politics in Karachi at this time; the many groups, organisations and parties competing for political influence and how this had repercussions on the break-up of Pakistan in 1972. Indeed, the workers themselves hint at their bleak future when, in an interview with Asdar Ali, they suggest that Bhutto brought them nothing but suffering, violence and death (p. 194).

Throughout this invigorating book Asdar Ali presents a narrative that is far removed from the oft-dry tomes that chart the minutiae of party building. In fact, this is a rich and detailed analysis that clearly and openly reflects the author's literary interests, his wider understanding of South Asia and his sympathy with both the class struggle and the people that tried to bring it to newly-formed Pakistan. This book has the potential to be a key starting point for scholars across the wide-ranging disciplines of anthropology, politics, sociology, South Asian and social movement studies and shows that it's possible to widen one's scope of what constitutes politics and history in order to tell the stories of the people that have struggled, and continue to struggle, for more just societies in even the most challenging and complex geographies.

Notes

[1] In 2007, *Newsweek* used a picture of a braying mob of apparent Pakistanis with the headline 'The World's Most Dangerous Country Isn't Iraq. It's Pakistan.'; in its January 5th-11th 2008 edition, *The Economist* led with a front page that depicts a hand grenade with the word Pakistan and a reproduction of the imagery of the Pakistani flag underneath the headline 'The World's Most Dangerous Place'.

[2] Michel-Rolph Trouillot. (1995). *Silencing the Past*. Boston: Beacon Press.

About the author:

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