

# Those Struggling for a Different Pakistan

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## I. Prologue

Pakistan is in a state of crisis. The history of Pakistan, looked at from a human perspective, has been a perpetual crisis since its birth. The ruling elite have operated — from the very beginning — on cronyism, nepotism, and legal and illegal corruption. They have always been inefficient and indifferent to the plight of the masses. The masses meanwhile have got on with life in the narrow boundaries that they have been allowed by the state. Without educational facilities, they have gleaned their knowledge from oral history and traditions; without health care after the British destruction of local and Islamic traditions of health care (which still persist and serve people but without their erstwhile potencies), they have turned to the occult of saints and indigenous remedies; faced with brutal repression for any attempt to claim rights, they have learned to operate dubiously — bowed head and 'yes-saying' in front of masters but 'laziness' and 'dishonesty' (of taking a few rupees here and there, a few grains of wheat here and there) as a tactic for survival. Above all, they have learnt to survive on their own with support from each other.

Yet, even within this perpetual drama of the elite and the masses (masters and slaves), some set out to turn the page and set course for a new Pakistan. One such group of people were those who banded together under the umbrella of the Progressive Writers Association. Formed in the 1930s, the Progressive Writers Association was a potent force until the 1980s (and it still continues today). They were writers, poets, artists, filmmakers but also political activists. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Habib Jalib, Sardar J'afri, and Ahmad Faraz are but a few of those who identified with this group. Their visions and actions were motivated by a desire to create, in Pakistan, a state that abides by the highest human principles — of care for human beings and nature. They fought for participatory democracy (not just an election every five years) and argued for a welfare state (services from the state for the masses). In foreign affairs they were radically anti-imperialist; formed by the atmosphere of anti-colonial struggle, they wanted to chart a path for the Third World that was independent of the Cold War and focused on human development and not the development of weapons and wars.

The Pakistani elite did not understand the Progressive Writers. They thought things were jolly and acted as if to say: "Well, my bungalows are being built, my son is now a bureaucrat, my land has never returned so much money, my daughter has married an army captain with prospects, and I am about to buy a flat in London . . . the people are OK . . . they can't really do better and they eat better than the Indians . . . all is well." There was no education, or health system, and therefore little movement up the ladder of social stratification for the poor. They were living to perpetually toil for the rich, while at the same time the state (in line with IMF and World Bank projects) was privatizing

and minimizing its capacity to deliver for the people. The Progressive poet Josh has two lines that well sum up Pakistan from its birth to present:

*The sky bore witness, the earth too cried,  
Someone passed in splendor, someone else passed away.*

The Progressive Writers were jailed, tortured, and hunted into exile. They had dreamed of an egalitarian society where the state worked for the people and delivered services to them, where no one had to lose dignity or bow their head for being poor. Instead, they saw society gripped ever more firmly by militarization, oppressed by landlordism, and embroiled in imperial slavery — then in the Cold War and now in the War on Terror. As the first generation of Progressive Writers faced up to defeat, they still kept alive one lamp — hope. Ahmad Faraz strikes a defiant note in the poem “Why Should We Sell Our Dreams?”:

*We may be humble in our ways,  
But when were we so poor  
As to sell our dreams at your door?*

We carried our wounds in our eyes,  
But when were we so weak  
As to display them on the street?

Our hands are empty  
Yet we were not so short of pride  
As to peddle our dreams in public,  
Wearing tattered clothes, crying  
Dreams for sale! Buy a dream!

Why should we sell our dreams,  
Dreams for which we gave our eyes,  
Dreams that were so dear to us  
That we gave up all other desires?

True, we are unheard, voiceless,  
Bereft of honour or fortune;  
True, we may be luckless, talentless,  
But why should we sell our fables, the stars and moons  
That we have dreamt upon this earth?

Merchant!  
You have brought your piles of paper money  
From the markets of greed,  
You’ve brought gold and silver coins;  
So often you have brought temptation.  
But why should we sell to you  
The treasure of our blood?

Our dreams may be trifling  
And have no meaning  
Yet they are the dreams of the aggrieved  
They are not the dreams of Zulekha  
Putting blame on the Joseph of her desire,

Nor the dreams of Egyptian king,  
For his prisoners to interpret;  
These are not the dreams of tyrants  
Who bring helpless men to the gallows  
Nor the dreams of plunderers  
Who put the dreams of others to the sword.

Our dreams are the dreams of the pure in heart,  
Dreams of word and music  
Dreams of doors that wait to be opened  
Dreams of voices that are silenced.

## **II. Dreams of Doors That Wait to Be Opened**

Recent events remind us of the truth of Josh's words: "Someone passed in splendor, someone else passed away" — in misery. The floods have devastated the country, 20 million people have been affected. Inflation is set to rise by 20 percent due to the destruction of agricultural land and the death of 200,000 or so animals. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to live in tents and in the open, having lost the little they owned. The suffering is borne by the 40 percent of Pakistanis who live below the poverty line. It is their houses that have been destroyed and inflation will affect them hardest.

The government's response has been well documented — indecision, inefficiency, and indifference have been characteristic. None of which is surprising. The cabinet is a talk shop, without experience or capacity to deliver goods to the people even at the best of times, let alone in times of crisis. They, as well as the army, have abrogated responsibility for most of the country to local landlords and chieftains and lately NGOs. This 'thin state' has been encouraged by international financial institutions. Conditionalities on their loans have demanded privatization of government services, withdrawal of subsidies on such items as oil and gas that benefit the poor, and institutionalization of regressive taxation, such as VAT, that unfairly targets the poor.

Pakistan has an external debt of 55 billion dollars. In fiscal year 2009-2010 alone Pakistan paid up to US\$3.4 billion to its external debtors. A campaign has recently been launched to demand the cancellation of Pakistan's external debt. At a multi-party conference on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August in Lahore, twenty-eight progressive groups met to form a united platform. Khaliq Shah, the keynote speaker and a leader of the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt, showed that most of Pakistan's external debt has been incurred by dictators, in particular, under Ayub, Zia, and Musharraf. For example, external debt stood at US\$35 billion when Musharraf took power but ballooned to US\$49 billion by the end of his term.

Supporting Shah's assessment, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, an academic, writer, and activist of the Workers Party Pakistan as well as a campaigner for debt cancellation based in Islamabad, pointed out in his address that there was a clear link between Western military agendas and loans. Western governments and international financial institutions had rewarded dictators in return for Pakistan's involvement in the Cold War under Ayub and Zia and in the War on Terror under Musharraf. Donors had seldom taken care to see that the money granted was used for the purposes of development. Akhtar stated: there is no denying the direct correlation between Pakistan's debt crisis and military rule. The complicity of international donors and power-hungry generals must be accounted for; the Pakistani people cannot be held responsible for the decisions of generals and bank executives. But that is precisely what has happened throughout Pakistan's history: the burden of paying back

illegitimate debt has fallen on working people. And this burden will intensify dramatically in the wake of the floods if the illegitimate debt acquired over the past five decades is not written off.

Debt cancellation would bring Pakistan the breathing space to envision a new path. Over \$3.4 billion dollars would be available this year for re-building the houses, farms, and lives of those millions affected. To guard against government corruption, the multi-party conference suggested that a new committee (consisting of civil society as well as parliamentarians) be given teeth to supervise the use of this money. The campaigners held demonstrations for their demand in Islamabad, one outside the Parliament and another outside the headquarters of the World Bank. More demonstrations are planned in the coming months in Lahore (19<sup>th</sup> September), Karachi, and again in Islamabad. Meanwhile, the on-line petition site Avaaz.org has had over 120,669 sign a petition calling for donors to cancel Pakistan's debt. Sajjad reflects, hopefully, that, if debt is cancelled or the political will is found to default, then the "people of this country will be given some much-needed respite."

### **III. Dreams of the Aggrieved**

Unable to sleep in the heat and humidity of Lahore's summer, I got up to idle away a few hours in the night. I opened an email from a local political activist and read that Fazal Ilahi, Akbar Kamboh, Muhammad Riaz and Barber Randhawa were still in jail.

I had met them briefly in July. They, along with 250,000 power loom workers, had been on strike for eight days demanding a 17-percent increase in wages as had been recommended by the Minimum Wage Board, a government committee looking at labor issues.

The strike was called by the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), and Fazal, Ilahi, Akbar, and Muhammad were district leaders of the LQM. The Labour Qaumi Movement was founded by sixty or so power loom workers who used to meet at a tea stall in 2003. It was instigated by fate.

In early 2002, in the industrial city of Faisalabad in the province of Punjab, Mian Qayyum, after taking his lunch break at the tea stall of his friend Malik Nazir, was walking back to his power loom station when he heard noises from the neighboring factory. He hurried over. There three policemen were beating up a middle-aged worker. The worker, already fallen to the ground, was still taking fists and kicks from the policemen. Enraged, Mian ran over, threw the police off the worker, and started fighting one of the policemen. Seeing this, other workers joined in. The police officers, outnumbered, ran away. Mian then returned to work.

Mian was then twenty-eight, father of four children. He recalled, "I was worried, thinking what is going to happen now. I was worried for my family. Will I have a job? Are they going to arrest me? My clothes were soaked in sweat, and that night at home I did not sleep. Each knock or noise alarmed me. What will happen now?"

The next day came and brought nothing but the drudgery of a workday. Soon word got around that another Majnoon had awakened with the hunger for Laila's love. Workers began to seek out Mian Qayyum at his lunch break at the tea stall for help. He helped — offering advice, negotiating with bosses, collecting donations for some, and settling disputes of others. His boss, frightened by Mian's growing reputation, laid him off, politely. "Take your salary but don't come to work," he told him.

Mian refused the money and embraced dignified unemployment. With more time, he had ever more demands on his hands from the factory workers of Faisalabad. He helped as best he could. Workers began to sit around the tea stall and analyze their situation. Why were they so poor despite working in the heat for twelve hours a day? Why were the political parties not doing anything for them? What

use would it be if they followed the religious parties with their message of division and hatred — Sunni against Shi'a? Would this solve their basic problems of hunger, unemployment, bad working conditions, and low wages? Mian, unable to find work at other power loom factories, began to sell biscuits, bread, and sweets house-to-house, riding a cycle borrowed from Malik Nazir. He made about Rs 400 per day, and this kept his household going. But the tea stall meetings continued and the questions kept developing: What was the law there for? Why didn't they get their legal wages? Why would the bosses refuse to register them with the legal authorities so that they could get a pension? Why is it that the police always attack them and harm them at the behest of the owners? Weren't the police meant to protect them too? How could they change things? And what was their original sin that they suffered so much misery while a few zamindars enjoyed the fruits of this bountiful land? What could they do to see the workers get legal rights and protection? How could they support each other?

While these questions rang in the ears of sixty or so workers who now gathered around the tea stall, Mian Qayyum continued to ride his cycle to make a living and support his family and lobby for his fellow workers. Then the answers started to arrive: we will fight as a collective for workers' rights; we will unionize where we can; we will work with all those who want to help better the conditions of workers; we will support each other and stay away from religious parties that divide us — worker against worker — or political parties that talk of workers but wallow in riches looted from their sweat; we will serve each other and unite; we will come together on the basis of what unites us, "that we are workers." Mian returned to the tea stall to find that he had been chosen to be the first full-time worker of the newly formed Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM). Sixty workers pooled together contributions to employ Mian, and the tea stall became their headquarters.

That was 2003. Today, LQM has grown in reputation and strength. The 250,000-worker strike in late July had been preceded by one by 20,000 workers in the Jhang area.

The Jhang strike began in the middle of June, centered on two demands: the workers be given a 17-percent pay rise; and they be issued with a social security card that was their legal right. Farooq Tariq, spokesperson of the Labour Party of Pakistan, explained the background of the social security card issue:

Only 2.1 million workers out of 45 million Pakistanis in the labor force have secured social security cards. That is less than four percent of the total workforce. By law, every worker must be issued a social security card. However, many bosses never register their workforce with the Social Security Department. Most factory owners pay for a few workers while the rest remain at their mercy. Why is this so? The answer is that bosses are required to pay at least seven percent of each worker's total wages into the social security system.

Paying 7 percent of each worker's total wages would of course mean less profit for the bosses. That is, less money for shopping trips abroad, less money for vulgar grand palaces in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, with the hordes of servants swimming around them (out of necessity not desire), less money for Rolex watches and Chanel glasses. What of the government and its Social Security Department, why don't they get workers registered? Farooq Tariq answered, "The Labor Department responsible for implementing the law enjoys cordial relationship with the bosses. In fact, since 2003, the government in Punjab has banned factory inspections by the Labor Department, thus giving the owners a free hand."

For seventeen days, workers struck, based in the strike camps near main roads. Workers and their families stayed together in the camps. Entertained by dhol (a large drum), poetry, and the skills of Bawa Latif, they spent the days and nights hungry but determined. On the sixteenth day of the strike, they moved the camps to the area around the office of the District Commissioning Officer

(DCO). The DCO is a bureaucrat charged with local administration — who is often the judge, jury, and executioner rolled into one. The strategy paid off, and after failed attempts by the police to remove the camps and pressure the leadership, the DCO gave in and informed the bosses that the workers had to be registered with the social security board and issued cards. Bawa smiled as he told me of this victory, “We had finally had our day.”

The victory in Jhang alarmed the bosses, and when they heard that another strike was being planned, they send out a warning to the LQM. On 6<sup>th</sup> July, at 1:00 in the afternoon, ten people burst into a district office of LQM run by Mustansar Rindhawa. He was with his brother, listening to a worker who wanted help. One of the ten had a Kalashnikov rifle and started to fire. Naseer, Mustansar’s younger brother, was shot dead. Mustansar managed to run into the second room and locked the door. It didn’t help. The murderers broke in and shot him dead too. His blood-soaked body sparked days of protests in the city. It also hastened the 250,000-strong workers’ strike. But no arrests.

After the deaths of Mustansar and his brother, the LQM and workers continued to suffer arrests and beatings at the hands of the police and by the goons of the factory bosses. Mian Qayyum, however, is steadfastly against violence. It is “counterproductive,” he told me. “We have too much of it in our society already. We want to see a new Pakistan where the workers get their rights and can live decent lives. We don’t want violence.” The strikers supported one another with money and held fast to their demands. On the tenth day of the strike the bosses gave in and accepted their demands and negotiations began. It was a historic moment. I did the calculations: 250,000 people had each got a raise of 17 percent. If we assume they are each now getting at least the minimum wage of Rs 7,000, then it would mean Rs 1,190 per worker (per family) more per month. The average family in Pakistan is estimated to consist of around 7.5 persons. Given this, the workers’ victory would positively affect nearly 1,875,000 people.

Fazal, Akbar, Muhammad, and Barber were picked up by the police on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the strike as a message to other workers. On the previous day, the police, rather than protecting the strikers, had attacked a rally of the striking workers along with goons in the pay of the factory bosses. The next day, the police invited Fazal, Akbar, Muhammad, and Barber ostensibly for clear-the-air talks. When they turned up they were arrested. Even though the strike was won they remain behind bars. It is now nearly two months that they have been in jail. Their crime: they are struggling for a different Pakistan, dreaming the “dream of the aggrieved.”

## **Qalandar Bux Memon**

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### **P.S.**

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