

Pakistan: One hundred years with Sibte Hasan, Marxist social scientist and one of the pioneers of Progressive Writers' Association

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Celebrating Sibte Hasan

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Celebrating Sibte Hasan and everything he stood for in his centenary year

This is the centenary year of Pakistan's foremost progressive intellectual Sibte Hasan. It is perhaps time to not just celebrate the man and everything he stood for but to also revisit his thoughts with renewed attention. Because the country in particular and the world at large is in the grip of retrogressive forces that Sibte Hasan had warned us against.

He was one of the pioneers of Progressive Writers' Association which had among its cadres many creative writers. But, as Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed points out, there weren't many social scientists associated with the movement. Sibte Hasan filled that gap and produced a corpus of serious social and political writings that drew a lot from history. In each of his writings, he used the Marxist tools of analysis. In doing so, he followed the intellectual tradition of Allama Niaz Fatehpuri and Ali Abbas Jalapuri.

He worked as a journalist and political activist (he was actually sent to Pakistan to set the foundations of the Communist Party of Pakistan), and raised the bar of excellence in everything he did. He made a conscious decision of writing in Urdu and, in a non-reading culture, his books were widely read and ran into many editions.

In his last published work, *The Battle of Ideas*, a little after he passed away, he categorically states that he cannot cover "the entire range of social, political, economic and cultural conflicts or their ideological representations" and therefore would confine himself to "the clashes between secularism and theocracy and between enlightenment and obscurantism".

Despite believing in the fact that the future of humanity lies in scientific socialism, he said that "our

immediate task is to build a secular, democratic state, free from imperialist ties, and to abolish the outmoded feudal structures that sustain the civil and military administration of the colonial era...”

He was a firm believer in the rights of smaller nationalities in this country. Together these all make for a viable new narrative this country needs at the moment in order to survive as a progressive and democratic Pakistan.

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* <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/editorial-35/>

100 years with Sibte Hasan

The year 1916 was very kind to the Indian subcontinent. Notwithstanding the fact that the third year of the First World War was raging on, three distinguished personalities from the fields of art, critical prose and literature were born: the great painter and innovator of abstract art, Shakir Ali; one of the region’s greatest short-story writers and poets, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi; and Sibte Hasan, Pakistan’s own Gramsci and gadfly.

In an article published in *The Guardian* this past June and much circulated on the social media, Sarfraz Manzoor credited the eminent Pakistani writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, with predicting the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan and being prophetic about the direction of Pakistan-US relations.

Manto didn’t live long in the independent Pakistan, but it was public intellectuals like Sibte Hasan who educated generations of enlightened, secular-minded, progressive Pakistanis and, thus, prepared them for the long dark nights of military dictatorship and the rise of fundamentalism and obscurantism.

Sibte Hasan was born in 1916 in a village called Ambari in Azamgarh District of Uttar Pradesh. He came from a crusty zamindar family which boasted of traditions of intense loyalty to the British as well as outright rebellion to them, in the 1857 War of Independence. He describes the influence of rationalist scholar Niaz Fatehpuri while still a schoolboy in the following words:

“During (my) school education, the favours of Allama Niaz Fatehpuri upon me, I cannot ever forget. In the seventh class, for the first time, I read Niaz Fatehpuri sahib’s magazine Nigar, after which I brought and read his books. Reading Niaz Fatehpuri’s writings radicalised my thought, the ability to think with my own mind away from blind following. I learnt this from Allama Niaz Fatehpuri that whatever appears to be correct, accept it, whatever appears incorrect, reject it. It is because of his writings that I became wary of mullahism. Mullahism is a very bad thing and it has created a lot of damage.”

The young Hasan was further radicalised towards rejection of his family values, attracted to rebellion and revolution by the contradictions within his own family.

He says, “Then I saw one or two very extreme events. Once I had gone to a relative’s place. I was returning from there in the evening that I saw a commotion at the house. There was a huge neem or

guava tree outside our house. A man was tied to it and my late younger paternal uncle had a paper and he was forcibly affixing the farmer's thumb on it and the latter was screaming. His thumb was moving because of the screaming and uncle was furiously trying to affix it to the paper by making it static. God knows what happened to my late uncle, perhaps seeing my reaction or just by seeing me he felt embarrassed and let go of the man immediately. He went away sobbing. I still remember this incident and whenever I think about it, I feel very sad. I did not have the courage to say anything to uncle but I felt very bad."

The year 2016 is being celebrated as the birth centenary year of Sibte Hasan. He was not only Pakistan's own Gramsci but also its gadfly, constantly provoking and questioning its elite and people alike with uncomfortable questions in the best Socratic tradition.

After doing B.A. from Allahabad University, Hasan went to Aligarh Muslim University where he studied law. This was again a formative period in his life because here he came into contact with the Communist Party of India (CPI) and became a communist after reading the work of Dr K. M. Ashraf, a distinguished historian very close to the CPI.

This period in young Hasan's life is immortalised in eminent Progressive writer, journalist and film director Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's autobiographical novel *Inqilab*, in which the protagonist Anwar, an Aligarhian like Abbas meets a comrade 'Subhanovsky' who lectures the former on the finer points of libido, and inhibitions, as well as terms like dialectics, bourgeois, proletarian, Oedipus complex and fixations. There is no doubt that comrade Subhanovsky is modeled on Sibte Hasan.

From Aligarh, Sibte started a distinguished journalistic and literary career, mentored by two towering personalities of the Urdu firmament, Qazi Abdul Ghaffar, famed for his satirical *Laila kay Khutoot*; and Maulvi Abdul Haq, celebrated to this day as *Baba-e-Urdu*.

This intellectual journey is lovingly and delightfully recorded in Sibte Hasan's memoirs *Shehr-e-Nigaraan*, the title referring to Hyderabad Deccan, in his own words, "where my consciousness became aware of the beauty of life and where I learnt to love human beings". It is also an unforgettable record of Sibte Hasan's days spent in the company of remarkable comrades and contemporaries like the leading Progressive poets Makhdoom Mohiuddin and Ali Sardar Jafri, and an accurate picture of the crumbling milieu of the feudal, oppressive Asif Jah dynasty.

The heady, creative days of Hyderabad Deccan were interrupted in 1946, just on the cusp of the partition of India, to go to the United States, where Sibte Hasan completed his M.A. in Political Science from Columbia University in New York. The Cold War had just begun and Sibte Hasan too became a victim of the McCarthyite witch-hunts as a result of which he was first arrested, and then deported.

He arrived in Lahore in 1948 and started work with the newly-minted Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) together with his comrades Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Ashfaq Beg. However, the CPP was later banned on a trumped-up charge of attempting to overthrow the Liaquat Ali Khan government.

Sibte Hasan was arrested along with scores of comrades in 1951 in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case and remained in jail until 1955. After Pakistan's first military coup in 1958, led by General Ayub Khan, he was again arrested. Thus, the comparison to the famed Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, is not accidental; however unlike Gramsci, Sibte Hasan's internment mercifully proved temporary and he went on to research and write his seminal works.

It is not possible in this short tribute to do justice to each of Sibte Hasan's 11 works in Urdu and the

lone one in English. Most of these works, like *Moosa say Marx Tak*, *Naveed-e-Fikr*, *Maazi kay Mazaar*, *Shehr-e-Nigaraan*, *Pakistan mein Tehzeeb ka Irtiqa* and *Inqilab-e-Iran* require separate discussions and expositions.

The first four aforementioned books have gone into almost 20 reprints each, making Sibte Hasan a bestselling writer and a household name in Urdu popular literature; an astonishing feat for a thinker who by his own admission shied away from poetry and fiction, and was attracted to the critical prose essay.

The life and legacy of Sibte Hasan can be understood in three ways: as one of the founders of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in colonial India; as one of the leaders of the CPP in Pakistan; and as one of the pioneers of progressive journalism in Pakistan while working for such distinguished newspapers as *Imroz*, *The Pakistan Times* and *Lail-o-Nahar*.

There are also two other, much less-acknowledged ways to understand the significance of Sibte Hasan as a public intellectual who despite his command over Urdu, Farsi and English consciously chose to write in Urdu. The first is as one of the most important protagonists in the battle of ideas in Pakistan which had initiated in colonial India between the followers of the two 'Syeds': namely Jamaluddin Afghani and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan; then between the followers of Muhammad Iqbal and Maulana Maududi.

While in the colonial India, these debates were limited to the role of Islam in public life and affairs of the state; and the strategies of anti-imperialism and British (or Ottoman) loyalism, in the newly-independent Pakistan, the debates encompassed the role of Urdu, 'Pakistaniat', and by extension modernity and backwardness, 'Islam' and 'Progress', and the role of nation and culture.

On one side were popular, but nevertheless important writers like Naseem Hijazi and many ex-Progressives (it would be best to call them renegades) like Muhammad Hasan Askari, Akhtar Hussain Raipuri and M. D. Taseer, all of them writing in Urdu; on the Progressive side were equally distinguished names like Safdar Mir, Manto, Qasmi and Sibte Hasan.

Sibte Hasan entered the debate with the publication of his book *Pakistan mein Tehzeeb ka Irtiqa* in 1975. Unfortunately, despite the importance of this topic, the book continues to be ignored even by sections of the Pakistani left. In this writer's humble opinion, it is Sibte Hasan's most important work specifically dealing with Pakistan, and whose relevance increases as Pakistan moves towards celebrating the 70th anniversary of its independence next year.

The second way in which Sibte Hasan appeals especially to my generation is his spirited defence of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal against the dogmatists of both the right and the left. In fact, Sibte Hasan rehabilitated their role as the predecessors of the Progressive tradition.

Sibte Hasan's great contemporary, Khawaja Ahmad Abbas has referred to the former in his autobiography *I Am Not An Island* as 'one of the "Russians" or communists...propagating communism through literature,' which is quite unfair given that Sibte Hasan was one of those who not only vehemently protested the expulsion of writers like Manto, Askari and Rashid from the PWA; but also survived the destruction of the CPP following its banning, as well as the Sino-Soviet split later on with his prestige intact, and because of his immense stature was acceptable to every camp.

In an exchange with the famous modernist, free-verse poet Rashid, Sibte Hasan answers to some of the former's objections and allegations regarding communism and freedom of expression:

"As far as the personal freedom of any writer is concerned, I wholeheartedly agree with his view,

rather I think that personal freedom is the birthright of every man, whether he is a writer or a non-writer, since it is only in an air of total freedom that man's creative abilities and natural tendencies can prosper. Submission really reduces his life to a drying stream. How well has Rashid sahib put it in his preface to 'La-Insan' that, "Slavery reduces both the price and the stature of an individual. Both love and thought are reduced to being wanting and deficient." But his accusation that Progressive people advise the poet to withdraw from his individual right in the choice of topic, is unfounded. Which Progressive poet of India or Pakistan has instructed which poet or artist to create this kind of literature and not to create that type of literature. Although the creative man is strange because even while obeying orders he can create great masterpieces. After all, Ferdowsi wrote the 'Shahnameh' at the request of Mahmud Ghaznavi; and Michelangelo and Raphael painted the frescoes of the Church of Rome at the order of the Pope; and Shakespeare wrote most of his dramas for the sake of the belly on the direction of the theatre owner. Just yesterday Urdu poets (including Ghalib, Mir and Sauda) used to write ghazals-on-demand on rhyming couplets. This does not mean that we are in favour of order, instruction or advice. But my view too is that every artist should always follow his 'vision'. Every person knows that no one ever told Faiz, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Farigh Bukhari, Ismat Chughtai, Krishan Chander or other Progressive writers to write this or that kind of story, poem or ghazal; in fact everyone followed their 'vision' according to their own philosophy of life and aesthetic taste." Here Sibte Hasan comes off as anything but a dogmatic communist.

The year 2016 is being celebrated as the birth centenary year of Sibte Hasan. He was not only Pakistan's own Gramsci but also its gadfly, constantly provoking and questioning its elite and people alike with uncomfortable questions in the best Socratic tradition. Yet, he has been studiously excluded and ignored by all the major literary festivals celebrated in Pakistan this year, including the city where he chose to live his long and productive life.

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In pursuit of enlightenment

Sibte Hasan's works are much more important today than they were in his lifetime

Renowned progressive thinker and writer, Syed Sibte Hasan, and his scholarly work acquire eminence seen in the context of the society he lived in, and the state whose policies he, along with millions of others, suffered. He sought to promote rationalism and scientific mode of thinking in a society in which obscurantism was deeply embedded in norms and practices.

Sibte Hasan spoke about critical thinking, challenging the orthodoxy. He stood for the supremacy of people, thus denouncing authoritarianism whether operating in the society or the state.

Sibte Hasan was a prominent figure of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) and was a pioneer of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), which was founded in 1936. He, along with Ali Sardar Jafri and Israr ul Haq Majaz, edited the Association's literary journal, Naya Adab.

In the later life, he remained associated with PWA's activities. In 1985-86, he was one of the central figures behind the Association's renaissance, which took place amidst its golden jubilee celebrations held in London, Karachi and Delhi.

Under the influence of PWM, a rich corpus of literature was produced. Scores of creative writers made their names in fiction and poetry. Part of this literature produced in Urdu, and other native languages of India, was of such high standard that it could be placed with the first class world literature.

In literary criticism also, Progressive writers employed new and contemporary tools of literary judgement. However, a weaker side of this new thrust of progressivism was that it could not make many inroads into the social sciences.

Particularly after independence, emphasis was more on creative writings while history, sociology, political science, anthropology, etc., did not see noticeable contributions by the progressives. It is also true that the oppression that was let loose against those who held democratic urges had not left much space in the society for serious academic work. Universities which cultivate creative thinking were deprived of a culture of inquiry and research.

The individuals who paid attention towards serious social and political writings were quite few. Allama Niaz Fatehpuri who, following the footsteps of Sir Syed, had an impressive big corpus of rational literature to his credit and who had dispelled the unscientific beliefs and thoughts from a high academic pedestal, migrated to Pakistan in 1962.

During General Ziaul Haq's military rule when the whole society was subjugated in the garb of Islamisation, Sibte Hasan came up with *Naveed-e-Fikr* in which he traced the roots of political Islam.

But by that time he had consumed most of his energies and before he could specifically address the socio-political issues confronted by Pakistan, he died in 1966. In Pakistan, the earlier and more substantial torch-bearers of enlightenment came in the form of Ali Abbas Jalalpuri and Sibte Hasan, to be joined later by Mubarak Ali and a few others.

Sibte Hasan took to serious social writings after an exhaustive career as a communist political worker, a Politbureau member and a journalist. As a worker, he underwent trials of imprisonment and persecution. As a journalist, he served in *Payam*, *Qaumi Jang* and *Lail-o-Nihar* (as editor).

Perhaps it was his occupation with journalism that widened his horizons as well as interests. Therefore, when he chose to write on serious social and historical matters he at once got involved with diverse disciplines. His books cover a wide range of disciplines — socio-cultural history, history of ideas, politics, anthropology, etc. What makes all of his work attractive for the thinking minds are his objectivity and a rational and historical approach, all grounded in a profound understanding of Marxism and its tools of analysis.

Sibte Hasan's first book, *Shehr-i-Nigaaran*, being his memoirs of Hyderabad Deccan, drew criticism from a traditional segment for the author had severely criticised the feudal set up of the princely state whose cultural attainments were certainly acknowledged by him.

His next book, *Maazi ke Mazaar*, was a major work in Urdu on the subject. It delves into the creation of beliefs in ancient societies and looks how these beliefs became institutionalised to give form to what is identified as established belief systems in the subsequent societies.

Pakistan mein Tehzeeb ka Irtiqa came following the break-up of Pakistan in December 1971. It was the times when the fate of the rest of the country was questioned in international quarters, and even

in Pakistan there was a lot of confusion about why the country dismembered and how the rest of it could ensure its survival.

Sibte Hasan believed that in the first place the diversity of the Pakistani society should be acknowledged and what are relegated as regional cultures should be recognised as full-fledged and legitimate constituting components with the integration of whom a Pakistani identity can be created.

This narrative was completely opposite of the centralised mindset prevalent at the level of the rulers who had denounced cultural diversity of the country in the name of religion. Sibte Hasan also traced Pakistan's history at the level of the society departing from the hitherto trend of official and traditional historiography focusing solely on the history of the rulers.

The next work came with the title of *Musa say Marx Tak* which is a history of socialist thought from the ancient times to the nineteenth century. Sibte Hasan distinguishes between the utopian and scientific socialisms and writes in detail what these stood for. The book is free from jargons and presents its content in very simple language, a fact that has made it reader-friendly. The book has run into a number of editions.

In 1979 Iran underwent a long spell of internal strife resulting in an Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership. Sibte Hasan had been interested in Iran because of its rich literary history. Way back in the 1940s, he had written an article in *Naya Adab*, on "Daur-i-Mashroota ki Shayri".

He was well-versed in nationalistic trends in the Iranian history. Thus, when Iran underwent a revolution he was quite equipped to accept for himself an assignment to research and write on what had happened in Iran. Thus, there came the *Inqilaab-i-Iran*, a timely and well received book.

In the book, Sibte Hasan analysed the social context of the revolution, the forces that were galvanised by it and the role of religion in it. He was also in a position to suggest that Iran had to still go a long way to attain a true democratic revolution. To him, Iran was heading from the monarchy towards Ayatocracy, and the ultimate revolution was still far away.

During General Ziaul Haq's military rule when the whole society was subjugated in the garb of Islamisation and the claims of the military rulers that they were transforming the country into an Islamic state, Sibte Hasan came up with *Naveed-e-Fikr* in which he traced the roots of political Islam in the nineteenth and twentieth century and how it had come to serve the military regime's purpose. He exposed at length theocracy and its exploitative character.

Similarly, he dispelled the misgivings and misconceptions created about secularism. He also took pains to explain the nature of the political collectivity organised in Medina after the Holy Prophet's migration to it. Sibte Hasan held that establishment of a state was not a part of Prophetic missions because many Prophets did not establish a state in their times, and if others did so it was due to the circumstances of the times rather than as a part of the Prophetic mission.

Sibte Hasan died in April 1986, a little before the publication of his first English book, *The Battle of Ideas in Pakistan*, which comprised almost all those themes covered in *Naveed-i-Fikr*. However, there were two additional articles whose themes were not covered in the latter. These were *Iqbal's Concept of Man* and *The Battle of Ideas in Pakistan*.

Sibte Hasan's six books have been published so far posthumously. *Sukhan Dar Sukhan*, a background study of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry was compiled by Hasan Abidi. Ahmad Saleem compiled Sibte Hasan's editorials as *Pakistan kay Tehzeebi aur Siyasi Masail*.

Four of Sibte Hasan's posthumous books were compiled by this writer. These are *Afkar-i-Taza*, *Adab*

aur Roshan Khyaali, Moghunni-i-Atishnafs: Sajjad Zaheer, and Marx aur Mashriq. It may be mentioned that at least three other books of Sibte Hasan comprising his scattered writings are in the process of editing and printing.

It is not difficult to say that Sibte Hasan has contributed wholesomely in the promotion of enlightenment in Pakistan. His works are much more important today than these were in his lifetime because of the fact that the country has drifted more and more towards obscurantism and extremism since he breathed his last. Not only this but there is a need to enhance the efforts to counter the above forces. Sibte Hasan's pursuit of enlightenment needs to be the pursuit of as many conscientious people as possible.

Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed

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Relevant as ever

I.A. Rehman

The hold of retrogressive obscurantists has become stronger than before – an unavoidable price for having neglected Sibte Hasan's legacy.

Sibte Hasan, who passed away 30 years ago at the relatively early age of 70, had a many-splendoured mind and the gift of putting forth his ideas in a coherent manner that was utterly convincing. And he utilised his huge talent throughout his life for the political, social and cultural advancement of his people.

Journalism was the first platform Sibte Hasan chose for the propagation of his ideas that he had begun to derive from Marxist thought at an early age. As the editor of *Lail-o-Nahar* he set new standards in Urdu journalism based on investigative reporting and scholarly research and all this with a distinct literary flavour. Some of the special issues of *Lail-o-Nahar*, such as the one devoted to a scrutiny of the fatwa tradition or the 1857 centenary celebration issue attained the level of classics.

Sibte Hasan believed that the state of Pakistan had been hijacked by imperialism's hangers-on, a decadent feudal aristocracy, religious orthodoxy and ambitious adventurers in uniform. With a view to preparing the people for a decisive campaign for regaining their rights he first took them through a course in history.

Several works of monumental research, such as *Moosa say Marx Tak, Mazi kay Mazar* and *Pakistan Mein Tehzeeb ka Irtiqa* were designed to explain to the Pakistani people (and other Urdu-speaking public) the movement of socio-political ideas through history and in different lands. The author also laid the basis of a scientific approach to management of human affairs.

Sibte Hasan's main concern was the urgency of reversing Pakistan's drift towards authoritarianism and the tyranny of religious exclusivism. The key to Pakistan's survival with dignity lay, in his view, in the adoption of a secular polity. To promote this idea he devoted a greater part of his final

masterpiece, *The Battle of Ideas in Pakistan*, to a wide-ranging discussion on secularism. He began by answering what he described as falsifiers of secularism and went on to describe, in considerable detail, the development of secular ideas in ancient societies, and in the eastern world, especially in Turkey and Egypt, before analysing the secular trends in the India-Pakistan subcontinent.

The discussion of the religious reform movement in Turkey, which Iqbal also approved of, is important even today as it focuses on the obstacles religious reformers face in a tradition-bound society, especially when their rivals are backed by a state that can use its coercive powers to enforce its whims.

The principal issue in Pakistan, in Sibte Hasan's opinion, was (and is) the clash between secularism and theocracy and between enlightenment and obscurantism. He started with the argument that the "Founding fathers of Pakistan wanted her to be a democratic, secular state." But Pakistan could not realise its secular ideal without "abolition of imperialist-controlled feudal social structure, represented by the comprador bourgeoisie, the big landlords, the military junta, and the mullahs." Thus, alone could a firm base for the development of true democracy in the country be laid.

Thirty years after Sibte Hasan died one cannot say that the struggle for secularism and for promoting progressive change through literature has ceased. But it is doubtful if the progressive ideals are being pursued.

In support of his argument that the founders of Pakistan envisaged the state to be a secular polity, Sibte Hasan relies not only on Jinnah's declarations but also on Iqbal's views. In the case of Iqbal, he recalls passages from the poet-philosopher's 1930 presidential address at the Muslim League's convention at Allahabad, passages that are often ignored by commentators, particularly the advocates of theocracy. For instance, the following quote:

"Nor should the Hindus fear that the creation of autonomous Muslim states will mean the introduction of a kind of religious rule in such states. The principle that each group is entitled to free development on its own lines is not inspired by any feeling of narrow communalism."

In Sibte Hasan's view, Iqbal "pleads for a Muslim state on purely secular grounds, consistent with the principle of cultural autonomy" as evident from the following extract from the 1930 address:

"In view of India's infinite variety in climates, races, languages, creeds and social systems, the creation of autonomous states, based on the unity of language, race, history, and identity of economic interests, is the only possible way to secure a stable constitutional structure in India." (The absence of religion from the factors of unity may be noted.)

As for the Quaid-i-Azam's commitment to Pakistan as a secular ideal, Sibte Hasan quotes from his August 11, 1947 address and interviews to foreign correspondents. He also refers to the Quaid's speech at the Muslim League legislators' convention of April 1947, which replaced two Muslim states as the league's objective with one and is perhaps as important as the August 11 address. The Quaid had said:

"What are we fighting for? What are we aiming at? It is not for a theocracy, nor for a theocratic state. Religion is there and religion is dear to us. All the worldly goods are nothing to us when we talk of religion but there are other things which are very vital — our social, our economic life."

A far more decisive proof of the Quaid-i-Azam's secular credentials offered by Sibte Hasan is the account of the abandonment of theocratic ideals by Raja Sahib of Mahmudabad. Writing in *The Partition of India* Raja Sahib recalled that during 1941-45 he had come under the influence of some university teachers who stood for greater emphasis on Islam in League politics and became one of

the founders of the Islamic Jama'at. He confesses to have become an enthusiastic supporter of the idea that "Pakistan should be an Islamic state."

This brought the Raja "into conflict with Jinnah. He thoroughly disapproved of my ideas and dissuaded me from expressing them publicly from the League platform, lest the people might be led to believe that Jinnah shared my views." Raja Sahib obeyed Jinnah but was so greatly disillusioned that for two years he stayed away from Jinnah except for seeing him on some formal occasions. Time made Raja Sahib realise "how wrong I had been."

The second important plank of Sibte Hasan's thought was the political activists' need for clearly defining their role in a given situation. He had been a prominent member of the Communist Party of India and its Pakistani successor and had suffered for performing tasks assigned to him. However, in his last years he allowed his membership of the party to lapse and avoided discussing Communist Party's politics with former comrades.

This could mean either some problem with the party hierarchy or a basic disagreement with the party's role in the country's peculiar context. The party high command noted that Sibte Hasan had not renewed his membership but the reasons did not appear in public debate.

The matter was resolved by Sibte Hasan himself. In his introduction to *The Battle of Ideas in Pakistan*, signed a few months before his death, he affirmed his belief that the future of humanity lay in scientific socialism, and he welcomed the growing popularity and prestige of socialist ideas in the country. But he had not "discussed the role that socialist doctrines have played in the development of social consciousness among the working people, the youth and the intelligentsia."

The reason was his conviction that Pakistan, "like most countries of the third world, is still passing through the epoch of National Democratic Revolution." The immediate task was to build a secular, democratic state, break free of imperialist ties and abolish the feudal social structures.

For the reason stated above, Sibte Hasan concentrated in the last phase of his life on the reorganisation of the Progressive Writers' Movement. He organised a large and successful conference in Karachi and another in London. While preparing for these events he made a special effort to bring on the platform of the Progressive Writers' Association, along with writers in Urdu, all those who expressed themselves in the various national languages — Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi and the different dialects.

Partly this was done out of his lifelong devotion to the ideals of the movement. But perhaps a more important motivation was the belief that the future of Pakistan depended on the adoption by the people of progressive ideas on politics, economy, culture and the rights of women, peasants and workers. The writers were the primary source for the growth of such ideas. Without belonging to any particular political platform and despite their differences on political choices they could awaken the people to their rights and their responsibilities.

Thirty years after Sibte Hasan died one cannot say that the struggle for secularism, for an end to the feudal straitjacket, for a social democratic revolution, and for promoting progressive change through literature has ceased. But it is doubtful if the progressive ideals are being pursued with the requisite clarity and zeal or on a scale that could generate hopes of success in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the environment has become far less conducive for the realisation of secular, democratic and egalitarian ideals than was the case a couple of decades ago. The hold of retrogressive obscurantists, backed by armed militants, on the institutions of the state has become stronger than before — perhaps the unavoidable price for having neglected Sibte Hasan's legacy for a long time

although his thought is as fresh and relevant and his reasoning as irrefutable as ever.

I.A. Rehman

* <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/relevant-ever/>

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A tradition of saying 'No'

Zaheda Hina

A towering icon of non-conformism in a conformist society

Syed Sibte Hasan was born in a town of East UP a hundred years ago. He came from a religious family but, like many intelligent and dynamic young people of his time, he was so attracted to the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Communist Party's manifesto that he became a communist for life.

When Pakistan came into being, he was in the US where he had gone to study journalism. He started reporting on the UN activities for New Age weekly but his socialist ideas were greatly disliked by the US administration. Thus he was arrested for a few months and was finally deported. Ideally, he should have gone back to India, but on the direction of the Communist Party of India he came to Pakistan and then stayed here for the rest of his life.

A retrogressive ideology was forced upon this country since the time he came here in 1948, something we have not been able to rid ourselves to this day. This is why Pakistan finds itself in a cul de sac — of fundamentalism and conservatism. Sibte Hasan Sahab was acutely aware of the fact that Pakistan's younger generation, stuck in a quagmire of conservatism, can be pulled out only by those who follow the progressive tradition.

He took this task upon himself and wrote books like *Maazi ke Mazaar*, *Moosa se Marx tak Naveed-e-Fikr*, *Inqalab-e-Iran* and *Pakistan mein Tehzeeb ka Irtaqa* which instilled a new life among the youth. His books sold like hot cakes.

It was surprising for many that the young people were reading about secularism, theocracy and clash between conservatism and progressive thought in modern Urdu literature as if it was popular fiction. Thousands of young people in Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab were influenced by his books and started raising questions on controversial issues. During General Yahya Khan's reign 'Youm-e-Shaukat-e-Islam' was observed with much pomp. Here, Islam was being used only as an excuse; actually, it was part of an effort to prolong General Yahya's rule.

Sibte Hasan had the courage to write on sensitive subjects like secularism and theocracy that brought thousands close to his point of view. In an essay on Allama Niaz Fatehpuri, he writes:

"Mullahism does not belong to a specific country or religion; it is rather a universal mental state, a way of thinking and action which does not follow reason and argument based on logic — it tries to coax people to accept their beliefs by instilling fear. It injects a poison of fear in the hearts of simple

folk, pushes them to obey and serve. It asks people to accept without questioning what scholars and theologians wrote hundreds of years ago, even when what they say betrays reason. It is characterised by arrogance and callousness. It is devoid of emotions such as love and empathy. It hurls abuses on those who trip instead of giving them a shoulder to lean on and slams fatwas of kufr and heresy on those who have lost their way, shutting all doors of betterment and redemption on them.”

In a hypocritical society like ours, Sibte Hasan reminds us that those who raise their voice against dictators and autocratic rulers are remembered in history. He writes:

“In every conformist society, there have been people who refused to call evil good and were punished for it. Socrates had to drink poison for saying No. Christ was crucified, Abu Zar Ghaffari died a painful death in Najd desert, Imam Hussain was martyred, Imam Abu Hanifa was imprisoned for 12 years until his death, Bruno was burnt on the stake, Thomas Moor was killed, Sarmad was beheaded, Tahira Quratul Ain — an emblem of beauty and faithfulness — was killed, Karl Marx was expelled from his country and lived in abject poverty, Sardar Bhagat Singh was hanged, Julius Fochek and Gabriel Peri were murdered, Hassan Nasir was tortured to death at the Lahore Fort, Chilean president Allende sacrificed his life on democratic principles. But these lucky persons earned eternal fame.”

A towering icon in our midst, Sibte Hasan had the courage to celebrate the golden jubilee of Progressive Writers’ Association with such fanfare that stunned both his friends and foes. Remember it was the peak of Gen. Zia’s brutal dictatorship and people were scared of annoying him. In such times, Sibte Sahab gathered people who had the courage to speak the truth. He made preparations for the golden jubilee with courage and perseverance and made it successful.

At that time, we, who were around him, had no idea how drained he actually was. A few months later, he attended the Progressive Writers’ Association’s congregation in Lucknow, went to Delhi from where he had to go to Agra, but he suffered a heart failure in Delhi and could not proceed. Diplomatic decorum required his coffin to be sent to the Pakistan Embassy first and funeral prayers offered. His coffin kept waiting for the ambassador, while the prayer kept getting delayed. It was such a heart-rending scene that I couldn’t control my tears then. Even now, when I think of it, my eyes well up.

Zaheda Hina

* <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/tradition-saying/>

The article has been translated from Urdu to English by Saadia Salahuddin.

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On the politics of language

Dr Nasir Abbas Nayyar

A staunch advocate of the growth of mother tongues

Does association with some literary movement inspired by some explicit ideology help flourish the talent of a writer or just utilise and consume it in explaining ideology? How can a writer guard his or her originality while staying faithful to the ideological framework of the movement?

We can't resist these questions while setting out for evaluation of Sibte Hasan who joined Progressive Writers' Movement in its initial phase and stuck to its conceptual framework throughout his life. With even a cursory look on his books, articles and interviews, one comes to believe that Marxian ideology didn't hamper or consume his intellectual augmentation.

Hasan managed to keep broadening his vision of the dynamics of social, cultural, political and literary structures of society without endangering the socialist ideology. He was an unmatched intellectual and enlightened soul who believed in giving away all what he found best in his intellect as well as in history and literature.

He never restricted his intellectual efforts to just explaining Marxian ideology in an oversimplified manner. He avoided exhausting his mental energies in rejecting all opposing theories of his time. Though he raised and tackled theoretical issues related to socialism in his writings to some extent, his main concern was with real issues that he perceived as influencing the economic, social, political and intellectual life of the people.

Though he wrote mainly on the past, present and possible future of Asia, East and Pakistan in wider cultural and historical perspective, he didn't ignore the politics of language that has continued dividing our society.

Soon after independence, the issue of language emerged as one of the major and most sensitive issues of Pakistan. A new kind of hatred, loathing and 'linguistic sectarianism' was experienced by both hemispheres of Pakistan. Struggle for independence revolved mostly around 'one nation, one religion, one language' formula.

Native rulers couldn't perceive or didn't deem it necessary to perceive how a construct of colonial period can turn a newborn country into a place of hate and wrangle. A swift process of decolonisation was necessary to have started off soon after independence in order to achieve complete and unequivocal emancipation.

Realising the sensitivity and political repercussions of the language issue in quite early days, Sibte Hasan wrote articles in newspapers and journals. First he thought it necessary to illustrate unequivocally the particular significance of the discipline of linguistics.

Quoting Max Muller's line from his lecture delivered in 1889 at Oxford that reads "one who doesn't know what language is and how it proceeds can't be described as educated," Sibte Hasan deplors the lethargic attitude of Pakistani rulers, intellectuals, writers and academia towards linguistics.

His crystal clear vision of the importance of language in solving real problems should be appreciated. He said in 1955 that "I think no other country goes with Pakistan as far as the dire need for linguistics is concerned" because the language issue in Pakistan is the most complicated one.

Sibte Hasan is of the view that language has no religion but paradoxically, religious emotions are attached with languages in Pakistan, particularly with Urdu. He cites the example of a Karachi-based Gujarati-speaking literati who in 1970 attended a function about Josh where an Urdu writer said that Urdu is part of faith. If you don't prefer Urdu over all other languages of Pakistan then your faith is suspicious and doubtful. Sibte Hasan termed these people Urdu Kay Nadan Dost (unwise friends of Urdu). Instead of serving it, they are causing damage to Urdu.

Fascinatingly, Sibte Hasan's mother tongue was Urdu but he was a staunch advocate of the growth and development of mother tongues of all Pakistanis. He believed that one who loves his or her mother tongue is justifiably expected to love and respect his or her fellow people's mother tongues.

He disapproves powerfully the myths constructed in and around the colonial period and continued in the post-colonial era about Bengali, Pashto and Punjabi as languages of Hindus, Jews and the illiterate respectively. He notes down that these myths have given rise to revulsion for the speakers of these languages.

He particularly refers to the case of Bengali which had to suffer, first by the hands of politicians and others of the then West Pakistan and then it suffered due to a notorious 'one nation, one language' formula.

Sibte Hasan not only entitles all Pakistan languages as national languages but he was of the view that clash between these national languages is paving the way for unprecedented hegemonic role of the English language. Following the well-known policy of the English — 'divide and rule' — English-speaking bureaucracy is creating divisions among speakers and activists of national languages. They fight with each other and fail in finding a common ground to fight against the dominative role of English language which is a most auspicious colonial legacy.

To sum up, in the words of Sibte Hasan, I would like to add that if we are to prosper as a nation we should give equal rights to all Pakistani languages, including Urdu. These ideas propounded by Sibte Hasan are as relevant today as they were in the 1950s when he pointed out these issues.

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