

Pakistan: The vanguard

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History of left is not just a tragedy of errors and a story of failures. The left has cast a deep impression on Pakistani society. In East Pakistan 22 communists managed to win elections, 18 as Awami League members while four as independents.

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The left movement in Pakistan is a disable child of Indian communism. The same is true of the trade union movement in Pakistan. The Indian communist movement was an inspiration from Russian revolutions of 1905 and particularly that of October 1917. It was not a one-sided love. Lenin himself had developed a great interest in India. But long before Lenin, the British correspondent of New York based- Herald Tribune, Karl Marx had developed great interest in what he called 'an interesting country'. Marx, it seems, was simply fascinated by India. In his dispatch to Herald Tribune, he wrote: 'Hindustan is an Italy of Asiatic dimensions, the Himalayas for the Alps, the Plains of Bengal for the Plains of Lombardy, the Deccan for the Apennines, and the Isle of Ceylon for the Island of Sicily. The same rich variety in the products of the soil, and the same dismemberment in the political configuration' (1). He wrote quite a few articles on Indian subcontinent especially during the 1857's war of independence, a war that ended in defeat for India [[1](#)].

The Russian revolution of October 1917 had tremendous impact on India like elsewhere. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was founded in 1925 at a conference in Kanpur on 26-28 December yet the nucleus had already been set in Berlin as early as 1919. Its leadership participated in the meetings of Third International and played an active role.

The British masters took the red threat serious. First reaction was repression. The first attempt by the state to nip the 'evil' in the bud was Kanpur Bolshevik conspiracy case instituted against major communist leaders:

'The accused are charged under Section 121-A with conspiracy to establish a branch organisation of the communist international throughout British India with object to deprive the king emperor of the sovereignty of British India' (2).

But it backfired. The case got communists wide publicity. Not mere in India but across Europe. It was not until 1928-29 that communist ideas started spreading like an epidemic across India. There was an increased trade union activity and a growing industrial unrest. The number of strikes went up to 209 compared to 129 in 1927. Strikes were participated by 5, 00,000 workers and 31 million

man-days were lost. The mass general strike in Bombay attracted whole of India. The textile workers strike set new traditions of militancy in India. The teenaged proletariat was flexing its muscle. The textile workers strike continued for nearly five months: 26 April to 6 October. Strike committees had appeared and a pro-Congress newspaper Bombay Chronicle warned: 'Socialism is in air' (3). The communists played a leading role in these struggles. A new case was instituted to chain the communist leadership: Meerut Conspiracy Case. The Meerut case brought even big publicity for the communists.

But more than everything it was the revolutionary guerrilla activities of Bhagat Singh and his comrades that revolutionised India. Bhagat Singh broke the silence by exploding bombs in parliament and gracefully walked to gallows. His brief but epoch struggle immortalised him as well as ideas of revolutionary socialism. He remains the biggest revolutionary legend in Indian sub-continent to this day. In the 1930s, the CPI remained banned because of its rapidly spreading influence. Its popularity had scared the British imperialism. The ban did not prove any hurdle in spreading the communist ideas. Communists still worked tirelessly under different umbrella or front organisations and began to emerge as an alternative to Gandhi's collaborationist politics. Though communists were taking many zigzags in line with the instructions issued from Moscow as the crystallising bureaucracy under Joseph Stalin had adopted the fatal 'socialism in one country' programme. Accordingly, all the sections of Communist International would zigzag from right to left and back again in keeping with the eclectic twists and turns of Kremlin diplomacy. It was this zigzagging that CPI formed a 'popular front' with Gandhi's Congress by entering it. The CPI supported Congress in 1937 elections.

Yet another renewed upsurge by working masses began in 1937. There was a general strike of 40,000 workers in Kanpur. It was victorious after 55 days of struggle. In Bengal, 2,25,000 jute workers went on strike (4). Even Gandhi's Congress could not inoculate itself against leftist ideas. Ultra revolutionary Dr Subash Bose representing left-wing of the Congress, defeated Gandhi's protégé in 1939 and was elected as Congress president (5). He later resigned following a campaign against him spearheaded by Gandhi. It was a fateful year for India's future, and, for communist movement in particular. But it was events outside of India that sealed the fate of India. The Second World War had broken out in Europe.

The communists vehemently opposed the war. On 2 October, communists organised a big anti-war demo. It is said to be the first anti-war demo anywhere on earth against the outbreak of new war (6). Dr Subash, like Saekorno in Indonesia, formed Indian National Army and decided to collaborate with Japan to liberate India of British colonial rule. Gandhi's Congress bargained and lent a conditional support to war effort. Jinnah's Muslim League, though marginalised until now, lent a full support.

Communist support to Partition

On 22 June 1941, Germany attacked Soviet Union. The Indian communists were now put in a strange situation. Moscow issued a fatwa declaring death upon fascism. Joining hands with London and Paris or Amsterdam against fascism was not wrong. But in case of India, it was not that simple. The Indian masses would see any co-operation with British as treachery, as betrayal. And betrayal it was. But the Indian communists decided to betray to keep Moscow happy. Worst still, the Communist Party started supporting partition of India. Mushirul Hasan narrates: 'To provide theoretical justification for this new turn in politics, the Comintern and the CPI argued that there was not a single 'National Bourgeoisie' in India, there were two'. That is to say 'Hindu National Bourgeoisie' and the 'Indian Muslim National Bourgeoisie'. The Muslim League was characterised in accordance with Lenin's famous 'thesis at the second congress of the Comintern, as the party of the Indian Muslim

bourgeoisie and not as a 'stooge' of the British, which was how it had been described a short time before. The way was thus opened ideologically for the formula of Congress-League unity and a settlement with the British on the bases of a deal between the two parties that were the supposed bearers of the 'National Democratic Revolution'. As a sequel to this policy, the CPI instructed the 'Muslim' communists to join the League (7). Ironically, in few years time, CPI would again change its Pakistan thesis. In March 1946, communist leader R P Dutt declared that basis for the demand for Pakistan was religion not nationality. Five months after, CPI declared that the demand for an independent Pakistan was a reactionary one, based on the needs for Muslim bourgeois and feudal vested interests, who are seeking a compromise with imperialism for a share of the administration in divided India (8).

The British reciprocated communists' love by lifting ban on the CPI. Ironically, the first CPI congress was held in 1943 during this period of collaboration. But this great betrayal disillusioned and annoyed many. So big was anger that CPI offices were attacked. This was a dark period in the history of Indian communism. The communists were playing the strike-breakers. They were discouraging demonstrations and desertions in military. This was a period when teeming millions, youth, revolutionaries and freedom fighters were offering heroic sacrifice to liberate India. From 1940 to 1945, ten thousand freedom fighters were martyred; tens of thousands were sent behind bars while tens of thousands flogged (9).

The 1946 revolt

Come 1946 and Indian is in total revolt. Mass uprisings, strikes, desertions and mutinies in military. On February 10, navy sailors went on strike. To show their solidarity with navy sailors, the workers of Royal Air Force went on strike. On March 1, Sepoys revolted in Jaipur. On March 18, in Dera Doon, Gorka Sepoys revolted. Karachi, Bombay, Madras and many other cities were in the grip of general strike. On April 3, following the Delhi Police, the police in the entire province of Bihar, also went on strike. The strike observed by 100 thousand employees of Railways and Post remains a cherished memory of Indian working class. On May 23, almost half a million industrial workers joined this strike as well. During this wave of strikes, the CPI was still playing the role of strike-breaker. The CPI despite a membership of 48,000 was isolated from the working class. Both were going in opposite directions.

Year 1947: India is divided along Hindu-Muslim lines into two countries. Also is divided the CPI along Hindu-Muslim lines. The CPI advises its Muslim cadres to migrate to Pakistan.

Communist Party of Pakistan

The Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) not only inherited cadre from CPI but the two-stage theoretical legacy too: support the national bourgeoisie until democratic revolution and socialism would be the second stage. The communists joined Muslim League to support the bourgeoisie against the feudal lords. And meantime bourgeoisie's main defender Muhammad Ali Jinnah was telling his cabinet: 'Pakistan is a democracy and communism [does] not flourish in the soil of Islam' (10). And Jinnah's political crown prince, Liaqat Ali as prime minister of Pakistan was assuring the USA that it was 'unthinkable that Pakistan could fall prey to communism since [communism was] against Islam' when he met US secretary of state in 1948. This was first high-level Pak-US contact. The Muslim League soon managed to rid their party of the communist 'infiltrators' before they could help bourgeoisie against feudal lords. The purges drove the CPP to another extreme. Instead of steadily organising the working class for a revolution, it sought a shortcut--- a coup. The CPP

discovered a liberal section of the bourgeoisie, inside army, gathered around General Akbar of Pakistan army. Himself a relatively progressive officer, Akbar was supported by a mixed bag of radical nationalists, chauvinists and religious freaks. His band of army officers, annoyed by government's Kashmir policy and handling of some other affairs, was preparing a coup. The CPP got involved when its leader Sajjad Zahir met Akbar at a cocktail party. The general requested help and support. The CPP approved of the coup and attended few preparatory meetings. It was decided that plan be shelved for a while. Meantime, one military conspirator turned informer leading to arrests of army officers and communist leaders. Among the arrested lot was legendary poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

The government banned the CPP along with its student and trade union wings. At the time of ban, it had a membership of 200. This low level of membership had something to do with the partition of India as well. In the first place, Punjab and rest of West Pakistan was never a stronghold of the CPI. At best, it had 3000 members in Punjab (11). Most of the CPI members in Punjab were either Hindu or Sikh who migrated to India after Partition. But the membership in no way reflects the influence communists commanded over student and trade union movement. There was an added advantage left had: Progressive Papers Limited (PPL), founded in 1947 by Mian Iftikhar ud Din. Iftikhar was a radical Congress leader who later joined Muslim League. A rich feudal lord, Iftikhar however was committed to the cause of working class. He thought his parliamentary speeches in favour of working class ideas did not suffice to form public opinion. He thought to launch a set of his own newspapers to spread his ideas. Thus an English daily, *Pakistan Times*, an Urdu-language daily *Amroz* and later on weekly *Lail o Nehar* were launched. All three soon became the largest circulating newspapers in West Pakistan. Iftikhar also formed Azad Pakistan Party which became a constitutional cover for communists as the PPL became an unofficial organ of communists.

Communists in East Pakistan

In East Pakistan communist party was growing apace. The Communist Party of East Pakistan (CPEP) was more linked to CPI rather than the CPP. Following Zhdanov's line given at the founding conference of Cominform in September 1947, the Indian communists launched a disastrous armed struggle. The East Pakistanis counterparts followed the suit to equally disastrous results. Though communists managed to seize few police stations in East Pakistan but were soon effectively isolated and crushed. Between 1948 and 1954, there were 3,000 political prisoners in East Pakistan, mostly communists.

Soon there were ideological debates unfolding in the CPI as well as in CPEP. Moscow intervened to settle the political disputes. The Muslim East Pakistani communist were instructed to 'enter' Awami Muslim League, a split from Muslim League, while non-Muslim communists were asked to work in front organisations. The election results for East Pakistan in 1954 assembly speak of the communists' success. In total, 22 communists managed to win elections, 18 as Awami League members while four as independents.

Following the ban on the CPP, partly communists worked inside Azad Pakistan Party. In 1957, Azad Pakistan Party merged with some other progressive groups to form National Awami Party (NAP). The 22 communists in East Pakistan assembly joined the NAP and it became a formidable parliamentary force in East Pakistan. The NAP was not a socialist party. Its main leadership was not communist. It stood for anti-imperialism, secularism, regional autonomy and industrialisation. A political and economic crisis gripped the country in 1958. The industrial unrest soon spread to wide sections of society. The same year, NAP leader Maulana Bhashani (who belonged to East Pakistan) formed an All Pakistan Peasants Association to organise the newly radicalised peasantry. It was a big success. The scared and unconfident ruling class reacted to this new working class radicalisation by

imposing the first military rule in Pakistan.

The Sino-Soviet rupture splits Pak. left

While all this was happening in Pakistan, the Sino-Russian conflict was becoming grave from 1956 onwards, with serious repercussions for communist movement in whole world including Pakistan. Despite its bureaucratic deformations, the Chinese revolution of 1949, because of its success to end feudalism and capitalism, had a great attraction for the colonial world. Chinese revolution proved contagious for neighbouring Pakistan. Maoism attracted a big chunk of workers, youth, intelligentsia and students in particular. One big reason for tilt towards Maoism was an aversion for 'two-stage theory' that was stopping Pakistani left from striking for revolution at a time when revolution was a buzz word internationally. But Chinese bureaucracy also had its own priorities and ideological deformations. The next few years exposed the real character of the Chinese bureaucracy. It gave a big support to military dictator General Ayub Khan. In 1965, Chau En-lai congratulated Ayub Khan on his success in the sham polls. A war broke out between India and Pakistan the same year. It was termed a people's war by Chinese bureaucracy that lent full support to Ayub dictatorship.

Pakistani Maoists declared Ayub Khan's foreign policy as progressive. The pro-Moscow left during this period was not less self-deceptive. A pro-Moscow theoretician writing for monthly Outlook, a communist organ, in its issue of April 1964 was expecting that Pakistan's newly emerging bourgeois would come in conflict with the international bourgeois and driven by economic compulsions, Habib Ullahs, Sehgal and Walikas would turn to socialist block for trade. The Outlook theoretician thought that such a process would end western monopoly on Pakistan's economics. The communist theoretician thought that he would be the biggest madness if he opposed General Ayub as a door was opening towards left (11). Despite the support for Ayub, the left itself remained divided. If Moscow Nawaz (pro-Moscow) would support one section of the bourgeoisie, Beijing Nawaz (pro-Beijing) would support the other section of the bourgeoisie [2]. The left during this period failed to see the unprecedented economic growth internationally. The post-World War II boom had also affected Pakistan. A process of significant industrialisation had begun in a big way for the first time, giving birth to what Marx called its gravedigger. The left instead of organising and associating itself with the new layer of working class was hunting progressives among bourgeoisie to lend its support to (More popular frontism!). Its flirtation with the working class was confined only to sloganeering. That was why when a revolutionary movement, first of its kind in Pakistan, began in 1968-69 in Pakistan and swept away the Ayub dictatorship, the left was taken aback, and bypassed.

The movement had begun as protest against the hike in sugar prices. The students joined the protest. A Rawalpindi Polytechnic College student, Abdul Hameed, was shot dead during a protest demonstration. The spark set the whole prairie on fire. The industrial workers fumbled for a moment but then joined the movement. The movement was now out of anybody's control. The workers were occupying factories. Peasantry had risen up too. Strike committees had appeared controlling the cities. In the industrial district of Faisalabad, the district administration had to seek the permission of local labour leader Mukhtar Rana for the supply of goods by trucks. All censorship had failed. Trains were carrying the revolutionary messages across the country. Workers had invented new methods of communication. It was all a new phenomenon precipitated by Ayub's economic policies leading to an uneven growth. Consequently, the famous 22 Families owned 66 per cent of industrial capital, 80 per cent of banking, and 97 per cent of insurance business. In contrast, average monthly income of a working-class family was Rs. 780. Ayub's corruption was adding fuel to fire. In 1965, according to Delhi-based weekly Links Ayub family's assets were estimated at Rs. 250 million. It did not include the wealth transferred abroad in foreign banks (12).

Year 1968: like elsewhere, Pakistan's working class, peasantry and students all were in total revolt. But the left still caught up in its two-stage theory, was dreaming of Bourgeois Democratic Revolution led by progressive bourgeois. Professor Muzafar Ahmad, a communist leader of National Awami Party (NAP) explained the left's position in Outlook. He said when he talked of favourable objective conditions; he in fact did not mean objective conditions for socialism but bourgeois democracy. Consciousness in Pakistan was in no way socialist therefore revolution must pass through stages, he added. A revolutionary party was needed but in the next stage, he concluded.

Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)

Formed on September 1, 1967, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) had a rather radical programme. Its charismatic leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, once a minister in Ayub's cabinet, appeared in the political arena as a challenge to Ayub dictatorship. Bhutto, being an intelligent bourgeois politician, timely raised the slogan of socialism and joined hands with some leftists to form the PPP. When the Ayub dictatorship started targeting Bhutto, he became a symbol of resistance, strengthening his popularity and his grip on the party. Also, popularity enjoyed by PPP was a sequel to 1968-69 revolutionary movements. The masses had joined this party because of its socialist program. A new layer of labour leaders radicalised by 1968 experience joined this party. The Pakistani left had failed to understand the unfolding events. Consequently, it was simply bypassed. The Maoists formed a Workers Peasants Party (MKP) in 1970 but it remained isolated compared to the mass base that PPP had gained. Though the MKP and pro-Moscow communists led some peasant uprisings during this period in Kyber-Pakhtoonkhwa and Balochistan. But Bhutto meantime had snatched ground from under their feet.

When Bhutto assumed power in 1971, a section of the left found a radical bourgeois in him while another section declared Bhutto a social fascist. When PPP came to power in 1971, some communists joined the government but PPP could not bring any fundamental change save some radical reforms. This disillusioned the working class. The workers took to the streets during the period of May-Sept. 1972. The movement was especially strong in Karachi. The government decided to crush the movement. Demonstration of workers were fired at on in Karachi on 7-8 June 1972 leaving a dozen workers dead. This angered the communists who had joined this government. Some of them resigned in protest including Bhutto's minister Meraj Muhammad Khan.

In 1977, a movement began against the government spurred by economic conditions and the US intervention. The left did not understand the nature of the movement nor it analysed the nature of the movement's leadership. Left termed it a movement of democratic liberties and urged the working class to join it. Terming Bhutto regime as dictatorship was correct neither socially nor politically. And the hope of democracy from religious fanatics backed by the USA was even irrational. Their illogical analysis and hopes were soon dashed to ground when in 1977 another military dictatorship 'rid' the country of Bhutto's 'dictatorship'. It was the left that suffered worst of all during Zia dictatorship. Thousands of left workers were imprisoned, tortured, exiled. And in some cases murdered.

The 1980s was a decade of resistance against the dictatorship. The proletariat offered heroic resistance and an unprecedented fight back. For the left it was a decade of mergers and alliances. Bhutto was hanged in 1979 showing that bourgeois doesn't tolerate even some reforms and imperialism can go to any length to crush the working-class movement. Bhutto's hanging once again popularised the PPP and it became a symbol of resistance against dictatorship. A united front: Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was formed. The PPP, right wing, liberal and left all joined hands on this platform. During this period, the Workers Peasant Party and Socialist Party

were able to build some mass basis in different areas. But they remained divided. Another big failure during this period was left's inability to take any principled stand on sharpening national question in Pakistan.

Mergers-splits-mergers

In 1986, Pakistan National Party, a faction of MKP, National Democratic Party and Awami Tehrik merged to form Awami National Party. It was again an attempt at class collaborationist alliance with illusions in bourgeoisie as bourgeois nationalist leaders were the main leadership of the new party. Soon Pakistan National Party dissociated itself from the new merger followed by Awami Tehrik and a section of the MKP.

In 1987, another attempt was made at left unity: Qaumi Inqlabi Party/National Revolutionary Party (QIP) was formed. Again it was a merger among different left and bourgeois nationalist parties. In a year's time, this unity project was disbanded. In 1988, Qaumi Mahaz-e-Azadi and Workers Party merged to form Awami Jomhuri Party/ Peoples Democratic Party (AJP). Hardly few months had passed that on the eve of 1988 general election, the new part had split. The Qaumi Mahaz-e-Azadi led by Meraj Mohammad Khan opted out of the new venture. The issue was: should AJP support Benazir or Nawaz Sharif.

In 1986 a new, small but flamboyant element had entered the politics of Pakistani left: Struggle Group with Trotskyist ideology. It was a group of activists organised around a monthly: Mazdoor Jeddojuhd/ Workers Struggle. Formed in 1980 in Netherlands, the Struggle Group was working on enterist policy in PPP 'since it was a period of fight back for democracy and working class had many illusions in PPP'. In 1986, main Struggle leadership ended its exile and returned to Pakistan as there were limited liberties available now under military dictatorship.

The collapse of Soviet Union shattered the Pakistani left and it almost disappeared.

The Struggle Group was affiliated with Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), headquartered in London. In the tradition of British Trotskyism, Struggle Group was initially not merely sectarian but went through a number of splits.

One split, launched Jeddojuhd Inqlabi Tehrik/ Struggle Revolutionary Movement (JIT) in 1993. In 1997, the JIT led to the formation of the Labour Party of Pakistan (LPP). The Other split, Class Struggle, continues to work inside the PPP. Before it suffered another split recently, a member of this group was elected as Member of National Assembly on PPP's platform in 2002. He lost, however, in last general elections.

The early 1990's were a period of counter-revolutionary consciousness in Pakistan giving birth to the rise of religious fundamentalism.

The old left parties by now had shrunk to small groups. Mere shadows of old self. The Communist Party and MKP merged in 1997 to form Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party (CMKP). On June 3, 1999 another three left parties: Awami Jamhoori Party, Pakistan National Party and Socialist Party merged to form the National Workers Party (NWP).

In 2010, Awami Jamhoori Party, a faction of CMKP and Peoples Rights Movement joined hands to form Workers Party Pakistan (WPP). Meantime, all these parties have gone through minor splits and in this process Communist Party Pakistan (CPP) was also rehabilitated.

Both the CMKP and WPP uphold a Bourgeois Democratic Program while the LPP upholds Trotsky's ideas. At present the LPP, CMKP, CP and WPP are the main far left parties.

Besides these three, there are some left groups... big and small. However, none of the left parties has any mass basis. The trade union base of the left has shrunk and its, once strong, hold of the student politics is non-existent now. Left as a whole is hardly recognised as a force in political arena. There exists a big gap on the left. But left despite some growth in recent period remains a marginal force, divided and fragmented. The political vacuum has mainly been filled by the fundamentalists.

But history of left is not just a tragedy of errors and a story of failures. It no doubt failed to flourish the way its mother organisation in India has. Comparing it with Indian left, however, would not be fair. The Indian left committed same ideological blunders. But it flourished. As a matter of fact, first ever elected communist government in the world was formed in Indian State of Kerala. But in India, the communists were not banned and repressed the way Pakistani left was.

List of errors made by Pakistani left is perhaps long. One big failure perhaps was not to succeed in securing any parliamentary basis. But left has cast a deep impression on Pakistani society. At times, left was the most strong force inside the trade union movement and students. It took decades of repression to rid student politics of National Students Federation: main left wing student body that had hundreds of thousand of members and sympathisers across Pakistan until late eighties. Another big and important area of left influence was art and literature. Poets Faiz and Jalib had become legends in their life times. They remain the biggest literary legends in Pakistan to this day.

But what perspective for left in Pakistan? A lot depends on the radicalisation of industrial working class and the shape trade union movement takes. It is desperately needed.

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Footnotes

[1] Marx thought that imperialism would 'dig it's own grave' in India by introducing capitalism. This would lead to the development of a working class, which would 'bring down the system'. It's a salutary lesson that the imperialists were able to exploit communalism in a 'divide and rule' policy. This was something that Marx didn't foresee. The problem of ideology, i.e. '....the prevailing ideas, are the ideas of the ruling class' were recognised by Lenin, who saw that revolutionary socialists need to address these problems and not just assume that the workers revolution will happen naturally.

[2] In common with CP's across Europe, they were unable to correctly adopt the 'united front' policy proposed by Lenin and later Trotsky. This would have involved forming alliances with sections of the anti-imperialists, but based on working class activity. This would have exposed the vacillations of the reformists and drawn the movement towards the CPs.