Pakistan: 'The traditional Left is on the decline. It will die a natural death'

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In conversation with Tariq Ali, an activist, a filmmaker and a novelist

Tariq Ali is a name to reckon with. He's been a student leader, an activist, a journalist, a novelist, a filmmaker and a polemicist. At 76, Tariq Ali remains one of the most charismatic leaders. His championship of progressive causes in Bolivia, Kampuchea, Vietnam, and of course the Paris uprising in 1968 made him such a 'star' that John Lennon wrote a song on him. He's currently a member of the editorial committee of The New Left Review, and contributes to The Guardian apart from several other journals and periodicals. He's the author of several books including Conversations with Edward Said, Bush in Babylon, Clash of Fundamentalisms and The Extreme Centre.

Here are excerpts of the interview, conducted at the NCA, Lahore, on the occasion of the collaborative event titled Other Histories.

The News on Sunday: Let's begin with *Other Histories*, as Amin Rehman has decided to call his show. If one were to take 'other' to mean 'alternative', what exactly would be our alternative version of history?

Tariq Ali: I think it's no big secret that histories are composed by people who win over states and countries. Historically every successful empire has written its own history and the histories of the countries under its occupation. History has changed; it doesn't remain the same but effectively it becomes the history of the period. Then you have the presenters' history when historians of the present, as they call themselves, analyse events which are taking place before our very eyes; like the war in Iraq, the emergence of the ISIS, the bombing in Paris — write whole screeds about them, picked up by the entire media. This becomes history.

My idea of writing history (that I do and have done) both in fiction and in non-fiction is to come up with counter-narratives for this history, and to show what happened and what didn't happen according to those who were crushed. My histories are often the histories of the defeated, just to show the worlds we have lost, to compare what has been gained and what has been lost and how the world has moved on historically. My set of novels known as *The Islam Quintet* is effectively a set of novels of European Islam. Many people have no idea at all that Islam was once a major European religion till it was expelled from all of Europe systematically: from the south of France, mainly from Spain and Portugal which was Arab land, and also from Sicily. The reason to do this was to show that there were other lives, other characters, other cultures, and that these cultures were extremely important and left their mark on Europe. Europe's refusal to accept that mark created problems and created the whole mono-identity linked to Christianity that Europe decided to go for after expelling Jews and Muslims from the whole continent. It has had lasting consequences.

That's the purpose of it — to provide a counter-narrative and, above all, to encourage people to think

for themselves. I provide the glimmerings, and then people who are interested have to go and dig it out themselves. I remember when *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* was first published in Spanish, and I travelled around Spain, people, young as well as old people, came up to me and said, "We had no idea!" I asked, "Weren't you taught at school?" They said, "No". What we had in school was two paragraphs in our history books saying: The Arabs came; they lived here for 600 years; we threw them out. Six hundred years of history summed up in an inaccurate paragraph. It was not only the Damascenes or the Maghreb who came to Spain but a huge majority of the Spanish population — white, blond hair, blue eyes — who has converted to Islam.

So, when they were expelling people they were expelling people who were born in the country, and they knew it. I write about these things to provoke people to think both in the West and the East. The other question I've raised in all these novels is the status of women in the European Islamic world. While they had no rights — (no women or men had any rights at all in those states. It was not just women) — women played a much more active role than, for instance, they do today in Saudi Arabia, just to give you one stray, random example.

TNS: Back in the year 1987, you produced the film *Partition*, based loosely on Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*.

TA: I wrote the script, and Ken McMullen directed it. It was based on Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hassan Manto. If we had filmed that short story it would have ended in five minutes. So, we reconstructed the Lahore lunatic asylum or Paagalkhana, as it used to be known, in the old dockyards in London and created a film which was very artistic. A lot had to be added in. The film by McMullen, who is an artistic director, was based on (which I didn't agree with 100 percent) Marguerite Duras' *India Song*, which was also set in Lahore in the 1930s. It's a very choreographed film, and so was *Partition*. For me it was flawed; it had problems but then no one was doing that kind of work. Saeed Jaffrey, Zohra Sehgal, Zia Mohyeddin, and many others are in it. Saeed Jaffrey said it was the most interesting part he'd ever played. His big speech in which he expresses his views on Partition is still used in film schools in several parts of Europe.

TNS: Would you like to say a few words about the version of history pertaining to Partition, presented in the film?

TA: The film was an attempt to convey, historically, Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*. As we know, Manto was very unhappy about how the subcontinent had been divided. This was a subject that you were, more or less, not allowed to speak on, then and now. It's only a bit easier now. Soon after the Partition, after people had felt it and experienced it, they couldn't talk much about it but Manto expressed his anger and grief and bitterness in this three-page short story, in which, as the world outside is going mad and people are killing each other, what we have in the asylum is what the bureaucrats decide from both sides (India and Pakistan): that the asylums also have to be partitioned and that the Hindu and Sikh lunatics have to leave the Lahore asylum and be transferred to now ethnically secure outfits in India. The lunatics refuse to be so divided. They hug and embrace one another; they kiss one another and dance together. In this three-page story, Manto was saying that in those times of madness, it was only in the asylum that you found sanity. Later on, we surrounded the story with historical facts.

TNS: In your opinion, how does written language shift or define our historical identity?

TA: I can give you an example from the past and one from today. When the Christian crusaders took the Spain-Portugal peninsula away from its ruler, and expelled the Jewish and mainly the Muslim populations of Spain, they introduced a new language which is now known as Spanish or Castilian. But even in that Spanish language today you will find at least 20,000 words of Arab origin. The

names of their cities bear them: Al-Maria, etc. They tried to get rid of the language; they burnt its books but the language survived and they had to use some of those names.

> Every successful empire has written its own history and the histories of the countries under its occupation. History has changed; it doesn't remain the same but effectively it becomes the history of the period. Then you have the presenters' history when historians of the present, as they call themselves, analyse events which are taking place before our very eyes, this becomes history.

In Sicily, for a hundred years after defeating the Arab rulers, the new Norman Christian kings maintained Arabic as a major language of the court and the state. Why? Because, it was only in Arabic that all the textbooks were written whereby you could teach grammar, astronomy, geography, etc. All the old princes were taught in Arabic. It takes a long time to get rid of old languages. For a hundred years, Arabic remained the language in Sicily.

Today, just to give you a small example, once Pakistan was formed, two things happened. English was effectively the language, then as now, of the elite, used in the parliament soon after the British had left. That was the language our politicians spoke. But soon, in the years that followed, Urdu was made the dominant language — the compulsory language — and, as a result, what it meant in Pakistan and not in India, was that one language which had been intimately part of our culture, Punjabi, could not be written for a long time, could not be celebrated — at least in the towns.

I remember at Government College in Lahore, we had a very hard time getting the authorities to agree to having a debate in Punjabi. They were trying effectively to remove it. This, despite the fact that it was both the language of learning and of poetry and literature; and intimately part of the culture of a very large province in Pakistan. They made people think that these languages, these little languages as they say, had to be superseded and Urdu imposed on them. So many people – Pashtuns, Punjabis, Baloch, etc – were taught a language which, of course, their educated classes knew but their kids were taught that and their own native languages were, more or less, kept in the background. This has changed to a certain extent now but even today if you compare Punjabi in India and Punjabi in Pakistan there is no comparison.

A language serves many functions, of state, power and culture, and in order to win back other languages you have to fight. The fight is on in Spain where the Catalans in Catalonia whose language was literally banned during the dictatorship years in Spain have now won it back and are celebrating it. It never comes back on its own but is attached to forms of culture and politics.

TNS: Why is the role of the Left becoming marginal in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, and even Bangladesh? Does the Left have a future in the subcontinent?

TA: The Left that has existed for the last 60-70 years is completely on the decline everywhere including India where it recently suffered a huge defeat. It's related to the changes that have taken place on a global scale where effectively a new type of Left has been coming up from below, from mass movements against privatisation, mass movements of young people for housing; mass movements of women for recognition; mass movements of the indigenous peoples for their rights that have been denied to them. As these mass movements develop, some of them form themselves into new political formations and then begin to win elections. That has happened in South America; it hasn't happened here.

I guess it happened here to a certain extent in the Aam Aadmi Movement in India which said a curse on all your politics, and your corrupt politicians, and your moneymaking. We are going to speak for the ordinary people. They won a lot of seats. They were not perfect by any means, and they had

problems of their own but that was the movement which has been relatively successful in India. By and large, the traditional Left is on the decline. It will die a natural death.

In the part of the subcontinent that is now Pakistan, the Left was always very weak. It was largely a rural area. The Left intellectuals in this region decided to set up a chain of newspapers called Progressive Papers Limited in which Faiz Ahmed Faiz, IA Rehman and my father were all involved. These were an extremely brilliant set of newspapers: *The Pakistan Times* in English, *Imroz* in Urdu, *Lail-o-Nihar*, a cultural weekly edited by the late Sibte Hassan. The quality of journalism and the quality of writing was very good but they were 'radical' papers. Their aim was to transform thinking which they did to a certain extent but to many they became a substitute for building a Left organisation because they had it easy. The media was on their side. Then General Ayub Khan ended that by taking the newspapers over in 1959. That marked the end of the story.

The Left has since then grappled with problems but not gotten anywhere. A large section of the Left made a huge mistake by remaining aloof from the big uprising which swept Pakistan in 1968-69 and toppled the dictatorship. It was young people: young students, young peasants and civil servants who did it. That was the time when a small party could have become big like the Peoples Party did. But the traditionally organised Left failed that test both here and even more so in what was then East Pakistan.

TNS: On a lighter note, it's been rumoured that back in 1961 while you were a student at Government College, Lahore, you made a sensational painting.

TA: What we made was not a fictional painting. That painting half happened as a joke. The three of us who were at college together — the late Salmaan Taseer, Shahid Rehman and myself — went out at the height of dictatorship at 2am with large amounts of red paint, and on the beautiful, pristine, pure wall of the bridge leading to the Cantonment, we painted 'Yankee Go!' That was our contribution to art.

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P.S.

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