

## ***Book Reviews***

**Kamran Asdar Ali.** *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972*. London, U.K.: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd./Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd. 2015. 304 pages. £ 59.00.

The book is divided into two parts consisting of eight chapters, including the introductory and concluding chapters, and an epilogue. It is a 304 page book including notes and references, which are not only interesting but are very helpful for any reader interested in the topic. The introductory chapter sets the stage for the reader, introducing her to the diversity of nations living in the geographical boundaries of Pakistan and points to the failure of their integration in the state project. The author also touches upon the ethnic and nationalistic struggles played out in Pakistan throughout history and their relationship with the politics of the left. Furthermore, he reiterates that mainstream discourse on Pakistan's history presents the struggle for separate nation in unified India as a struggle of a monolith Muslim nation in the sub-continent largely ignoring the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of these Muslims, thereby undermining their aspirations for freedom, self-determination and autonomy. The Bengali and the Baloch freedom movements have been cited as examples of what he calls the "collective amnesia" of the nation and notes that resistance, or left-leaning, movements have also been largely ignored in mainstream discourses on the history of Pakistan.

The author also builds the case around the use of other forms of representation, such as art, fiction and poetry in digging out alternative histories that are missing from the grand narratives; a method that has been employed in the book repeatedly. The chapter also introduces us to the members of the earliest left-wing party of the country, the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP). The members of the CPP all belonged to the Communist Party of India (CPI), who mostly were men from the highly-educated elite Muslim families of North India (not indigenous to the areas that became a part of Pakistan) and their deep commitment to the cause was manifest in their personal lives. A glimpse of the political climate of the new-born state in which the CPP was operating is provided.

Chapter one describes the creation of the Communist Party Pakistan (CPP) after the division of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which itself is also briefly introduced. The author uses literary texts, such as Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories, to depict the chaos and confusion of these times. The confusion around a framework to understand the dynamics of change that was taking place at the time of India's partition and to predict what would follow such an event is also manifest in the CPI's stance towards partition. The communists first regarded the demand for Pakistan as a ploy employed by elite leadership of the All India Muslim League to weaken the struggle of the common people of India against the British colonialists. However, their stance changed and they started to regard the partition of India into two states as the right of autonomy to all nations. Internal divisions in party followed but the CPI grudgingly

accepted the creation of Pakistan and also divided the CPI into CPI and CPP. However, some of the influential members of the CPI continued writing and speaking in support of their earlier arguments. The tumultuous relationship of the CPI with the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League are also delved in the book in considerable detail.

Chapter two focusses on the working of CPP since 1948 and familiarises the reader to other left-leaning organisations working in the areas of India that later became Pakistan. The most important task present to the CPP at the time was to form an organised political party and reach out to the masses, particularly the unionised labour in the very small industry, within meagre financial resources. However, the CPP was operating in a very hostile environment and the state treated the CPP with immense suspicion since its inception which culminated into an outright ban of the CPP after the Rawalpindi conspiracy in 1954.

In addition to extending the theme of the book, Chapter 3 primarily concerns with the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association. The author explicates on the discussions that took rounds in those times. Like the CPP, the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association was also grappling to find a framework for themselves to work in and the internal debates on various literary texts are used to highlight the prevailing confusion. The chapter also outlines some of the counter movements and criticism of the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association, which highlights further the environment that the left in Pakistan was operating in.

It was the implication of some of the members of the CPP in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy that gave the state of Pakistan the chance to violently crush the CPP. Chapter 4 discusses in detail the infamous attempted coup from within the ranks of the Pakistan army. The writer provides the different accounts of the incident but like many others does not attempt to bring closure to the event. However, according to Asdar Ali, the timing of the declassifying of some of the details of the attempted coup seem to suggest that it was used to undermine the politics of the left in Pakistan; particularly that of the CPP and it gave the state a further chance to malign the communists as anti-state and anti-Pakistan. The chapter also details how the American and British intelligence agencies assisted the Pakistani state apparatus in subverting the communist activities in the country in order to safeguard their interests in the region and to counter the Sino-Soviet influences. The Intelligence cells instituted by these foreign intelligence services were instrumental in spreading an anti-communist rhetoric through various means even invoking religion to extend their agenda and labelling them as anti-Islam.

Chapter 5 chronicles what little we know of the life, work and death of the revolutionary Hasan Nasir. His tragic murder has led him to be a given the status of a martyr. The inimical political environment surrounding the times around his life are pictured as well including the internal rifts of the left-wing politics. The chapter also details some of the international influences, that is, a pro-Soviet side and a pro-China side on the left in Pakistan, that were beginning to show what would later become major divides within the left.

Karachi, the biggest metropolitan of the country, has the largest concentration of industry and therefore of industrial labour. Karachi was the site of major labour strikes under the Bhutto government. The government's response to the strike and the use of

brute force against the labourers in Karachi stand in sharp contrast to the Bhutto's socialist rhetoric. The chapter describes in detail the environment in Karachi at the time of labour trouble under the Bhutto government, the problems faced by industrial labour, their demands, their means of actions and the state's response to it. The chapter also sheds light on the then emerging ethnic conflicts showing how the class struggle became messy when the proletariat's other identities were invoked.

In the chapters titled Concluding thoughts and Epilogue, the author brings together the lessons learnt from the class politics as played out in the preceding decades. The chapter shows that there ran many fault lines across the communist movement in Pakistan as across any other movement. The movement itself was marred by internal divisions and strife, but more so the industrial proletariat or the vanguard of the Marx's revolution became internally divided. To simplify to the extent of being caricaturised, Marx's revolutionary vanguard's enthusiasm for a proletariat revolution goes unquestioned in classical Marxist tradition but in real life the daily lives of the poor are characterised by "messiness and multiplicity" where an unending struggle for a cause becomes almost an impossibility. The author also goes back and relates these rifts to the creation of Pakistan under the one-nation-one-religion slogan and takes the contemporary ethnic and sectarian violence as its inevitable outcome.

Now, if we were to look at the mainstream discourse on Pakistan's history, we know that there is no such thing as the "*left*". "*Communism*" is a thing of the past that happened in Eastern Europe and Russia and it died there because it was doomed. In the post-General Zia-ul-Haq, post-cold-war times in Pakistan, student politics has remained banned, there are no ideological student unions. There is very little space for discourses that are not "*the state or the Pakistani discourse*". The contemporary political parties are just different shades of right and even the society at large has right-wing proclivities and hence many perhaps even do not know that there was in fact a Communist Party of Pakistan. Only the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is commonly associated with socialism but most are unfamiliar with the brutal crushing of the labour movement during Bhutto's regime. In such state of affairs the book certainly is a much needed, very significant and important addition to study of history of Pakistan. Furthermore, the book also exposes the Pakistani state's harsh attitude towards politics of resistance of any sort from the very beginning also reflecting the authoritarian tendencies of even some of our most beloved leaders. It has immense importance for students and also for those who are otherwise interested in the state and society. It presents alternative to what the official accounts or more dominant discourses have been. The author has researched extensively, has cited published books and articles, gone through archives on Pakistan's history and politics in renowned research institutes, has conducted interviews with people directly or indirectly engaged in the movements, and also has gone through police records and publications of the CPP.

However, just like any other book, it is not exhaustive. The book opens up a discussion and there is ample room for academics to follow suit and trace the history of class struggle and activism in Pakistan. Some of these shortcomings the author himself admits and were clearly out of the purview of the text including the fact that it has traced the history from 1947-1972, and just as we know little of the grassroots struggle of the Indian National Congress against the colonialists we do not have enough information on

the struggle of the communists/socialists/Marxists of those times. Also, it ends during the Bhutto period but there is again a lot that needs to be written about the communism in Pakistan under General Zia and after.

The title of the book reads “Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972”, however, a predominant focus of the author is on the Communist Party of Pakistan so much so that it appears as a history of the CPP rather than of communism. Several left-leaning organisations are mentioned in passing on several occasions in the book but are not delved any deeper. We are not introduced to the workings of the several left-leaning student unions of those times, we do not know what the structures and functions of the several trade-unions, peasant unions looked like, we do not know what their debates and discussions were, how they communicated with the masses and how they reacted to it. The author has gone in some detail into the functioning of the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association, the cultural mouthpiece of the CPP but, for example, the “woman question”, believed to be an integral part of politics of the left, is ignored completely. Some of the other important events that I think were worth mentioning but have not been in the book are the peasants’ movements in NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa–KPK) and even perhaps the involvement of leftists/communists/socialists in the guerrilla movements in Balochistan. Moreover, even within the CPP, the author has given details of some of the more important figures in the movement but many others remain in the background and most particularly those belonging to the working classes who could not opt to go out of the country when states repression became too much to take. It almost looks like that even the communist movement in Pakistan was also inflicted with an elite-capture.

The Pakistani state was very suspicious of the activities of the CPP or any other communist network in the country since independence, the arrests warrants of many members of the CPI (later the CPP) were issued under the British Raj (including the warrants against Sajjad Zaheer, the first General Secretary of the CPP) and continued even after independence, the banning of the CPP after the Rawalpindi Conspiracy is understandable perhaps but the reasons for state’s outright hostility towards the CPP are not explained leaving the more sceptical readers rather unconvinced. As I. A. Rehman has written in the review of the book “*Yet he does not investigate the possibility that the state might have decided to crush CPP before it had done anything because Pakistan mattered in the eyes of the cold war stalwarts only as a bulwark against international communism and that this was the condition for their support for its creation* [Rehman (2016)].

**Sundus Saleemi**

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,  
Islamabad.

## REFERENCE

Rehman, I. A. (2016) Retracing Pakistan’s Left. *Dawn*, January 10, 2016: <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1231995>>