



**Kamran Asdar Ali, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics
and Class Activism in Pakistan 1947-1972***

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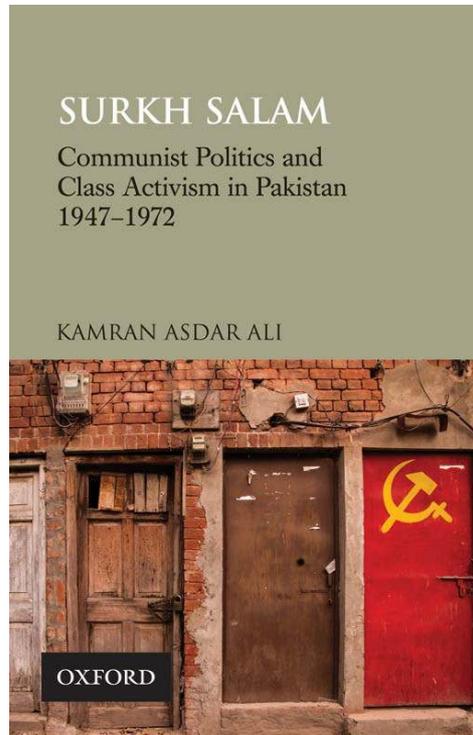
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- 1 In his “red salute” to Communism in Pakistan, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan (1947-1972)*, Kamran Asdar Ali traces the early history of the Communist party and its politics in the country. Ali focuses on three main sites of radical politics during the period under review: the Communist Party of Pakistan (henceforth the CPP); progressive literature, writers and their literary movements; and labor formations (of the early 1970s) in Karachi. From these three sites, Ali gathers together fragments and collects the remains of a forgotten history, portraying relevant characters for a better understanding of class activism and Communist politics in Pakistan. He relies on life-histories, literary sources and archival material to rebuild, from a resurgent political and cultural memory, this moment of alternative possibilities, and in the process, questions the hegemony of the incumbent narrative of Muslim nationalism (Ali 2015:2).
- 2 Apart from its many contributions, *Surkh Salam*’s key offering lies in its challenge to the current, dominant narratives—shaped by the perils of “terrorism,” a corrupt political elite and perpetual political and economic “crises”—on Pakistan’s failure as a postcolonial state. Recent scholarship on Pakistan is saturated with accounts based on the country’s supposed susceptibility to Islamic extremism, violence, and political instability (Lieven 2012). Pakistan, for many, is a “crisis state” on the brink of inevitable failure (Lodhi 2011). On the other hand, within Pakistan, the military-bureaucratic ruling elite stubbornly refuses to depart from its nationalist and, at times—when this suits its needs—Islamic narratives about the mythic nature of the nation-state. The unified narrative of the “Muslim nation,” that justified the Partition of India, therefore converges on this myth of the state (Ali 2015:3). *Surkh Salam* counters both of these dominant ideological approaches by offering an alternative historical narrative. It reframes “Pakistan’s social and cultural history by presenting other possible imaginations for Pakistan’s future that were available during the formative years of its existence” (p. 3).
- 3 Some of the recent works of those writing from the Pakistani Left, such as former Pakistani Communist leader Syed Jamal Naqvi’s *Leaving the Left Behind* (2014), or from the South Asian academic Left in the U.S., such as Saadia Toor’s *State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (2011), have already attempted to do the same. Although Naqvi clearly announces his disillusionment with Communism in his autobiography, he nonetheless simultaneously offers a fascinating first-person perspective on Communist politics in Pakistan. Toor’s perfunctory review of the political and cultural history of Pakistan is an admirable attempt to write against the dominant current in academia, one that privileges the lens of Islam, as well as extremism and the security state and violence, to analyze the Pakistani state and society. Also, Ali’s *Surkh Salam* poses a powerful



challenge to these dominant currents by carefully exploring the state's tense relationship with communist and working class activists and intellectuals during Pakistan's early years—a historical period mostly viewed from the ideological perspective of triumphant Muslim Nationalism.

- 4 *Surkh Salam* is structured into two main parts. Part One focuses on the formative years of the CCP, its day-to-day workings, the state's challenges to its existence, and the debates within progressive cultural politics during that period (1948-54). Part Two discusses labor struggles in Karachi during the early 1970s, alongside the political life and death of Hasan Nasir, a dedicated Communist activist.
- 5 From its inception, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was engaged with the broader questions of nationality and independence shaping Indian politics (Ali 2015:38). In Chapter One, we learn that although the CPI “accepted the creation of Pakistan by arguing for the division of the Party itself,” it remained deeply suspicious of the politics of the Muslim League (p. 55). According to the CPI, Pakistan's creation was “non-progressive and hence reactionary” (p. 55). The confusing and often contradictory directions taken by the CPI's ideologues, such as G.M. Adhkari and Dutt, and after 1948 B.T. Ranadive, further aggravated this ambivalence towards the partitioning of India. Even though the CPI in Punjab had allied itself with the Muslim League and produced a radical manifesto for the 1945-46 elections, post-1947, the CPP would typically position itself against the nationalist politics of the Muslim League. Soon after Partition, while the Muslim League was struggling to consolidate its tenuous hold on the newly-born state, and many newly designated politicians and notables were busy grabbing evacuees' property, the CPP cadres, such as Syed Sajjad Zaheer, were working to organize the Party and launch working-class politics in the country.
- 6 Ali's portrayal of real-life characters, who were central to the work of the CPP, is one of the main strengths of the book. In Chapter Two, we meet one such figure: Syed Sajjad Zaheer (1905-1973), the first General Secretary of the CPP and one of the founders of the Progressive Writers Association of India. Belonging to the *ashrafia* class of the North Indian Muslims,¹ Zaheer was sent to Pakistan in 1948 by the CPI to rebuild the Party after the exodus of its many valuable Hindu and Sikh cadres to India. Because the Pakistani state was by then suspicious of Communist politics in the country (also because of its leanings towards the Capitalist bloc and inheritance of the Colonial state's anti-Communist fears) Ali tells us that Zaheer mainly remained underground for most of his time in Pakistan (p. 73). In this chapter, Ali meticulously traces the day to day work that Zaheer and other cadres carried out to set up the CPP, the ideological debates that they engaged in and the labor formations that they had helped to organize. Zaheer, although extremely dedicated to the Communist cause, carried within him the hubris of the *ashrafia* class and was unfamiliar with the diverse social landscape of the country, and often proved to be rigid in his compliance with the directives of the CPI from across the border (pp. 82-85). He closely followed B.T. Ranadive, the firebrand Secretary General of the CPI, and “emphasized a politics of constant agitation”; the resultant confrontation with the state culminated in an increase in the repression of the Communists and their affiliates (p. 107). After being implicated in a conspiracy to carry out a military coup and his subsequent imprisonment, Zaheer eventually returned to India in 1954.
- 7 Ali suggests that the strength of Sajjad Zaheer's clout lay mainly in his literary, rather than his political, achievements. Much before his forced exile, Zaheer had been instrumental in forming the Marxist-leaning Progressive Writers Association of India in

the 1930s, and then following Partition, the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association (APPWA). He was “a respected short story writer and novelist” (p. 121). As one of his contemporaries, Sibte Hasan, argues “Zaheer was totally inexperienced in the party’s political work, with his own personality geared towards arts and literature” (p. 119). So, in Chapter Three, Ali introduces us to the second site of Leftist politics in Pakistan—that of literature and culture—, and illustrates how radical writers and intellectuals engaged in progressive politics within that sphere. This chapter reveals the contentious role played by such writers in refashioning the cultural politics of early Pakistani history, given that “the arena of culture and intellectual creativity was of immense importance to the nascent party,” the CPP (p. 124).

- 8 Saadia Toor has argued that, after the Partition, APPWA positioned itself against the liberal, nationalist intellectuals and writers, who considered the views of those affiliated with the former as anti-nationalist (pp. 52-75).² Zaheer, on the other hand, Ali tells us, criticized those nationalist, liberal writers, who refused to follow the CPP’s radical critique of capitalism and openly invited them to join the struggle against class exploitation under the banner of the CPP (pp. 124-26). In this chapter, Ali discusses these “intellectual interventions, discussions, and debates in order to rethink Pakistan’s early history as a period of uncertainty about the future historical trajectories” (p. 133). He takes us into the debates about the competing imaginaries of the nation-state on the cultural and intellectual plain by focusing on the “question of morality (‘pure’ or obscene literature),” which the progressive critics had formulated via a critique of the works of Saadat Hasan Manto, the iconic Urdu short story writer (p. 133). These progressive, APPWA-affiliated writers engaged in the formulation of competing interpretations of what would “constitute a national culture” through the idioms of the obscene and the immoral amply found in Manto’s writing (p. 133). In doing so, Ali claims, they came “dangerously close to ... their own opposition, the Pakistani state and the Islamists ... as they too were seeking to create a universalist politics of social identity and homogeneity and a rational society” (p. 159). If writers such as Manto were ambivalent and skeptical about the meaning of the Partition, what it meant to be a human in such a traumatic context, and about the future of the post-partitioned state, his progressive critics, the Communist intellectuals, pushed for a distinctly Marxist-inspired social and historical trajectory of progress and “class solidarity” in their work (pp. 152-54). In this early period of competing cultural ideologies, both the progressive and the liberal, nationalist writers differed as to the meaning and direction of their humanism and how it implicated the state, morality, and the nation.
- 9 On March 9th, 1951, Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz Ahmad Faiz (the famous progressive poet and General Secretary of the Pakistan Trade Union Federation), Mohammad Ata and Mohammad Afzal, both members of the Central Committee of the CPP, were arrested on the charges of planning a military coup, to be led supposedly by Major General Akbar Khan. Khan and a few other Army officers were arrested as well. Soon after, most of the first and second tier leadership of the CPP was thrown into jail. Chapter Four is the story of this famous case, known as the 1951 Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. Ali builds on personal letters and interviews in this chapter to present many divergent explications of the involvement of the CPP in the planned coup. Faiz, Ali suggests, seemed to have worked as a bridge between the Officers and the CPP, and may have also exerted a persuasive influence on Zaheer (pp. 191-94). Zaheer had consulted his CPP colleagues on the Officers’ proposition who, in return for their support of a “nationalist” coup, were willing to allow

the CPP to function freely (p. 192). After the CPP Central Committee learnt that these Officers had no clear plan of what steps would follow the coup or the CPP's role in it, they apparently rejected the proposal. Even though the events leading up to the arrests and the CPP's role in the planning of the coup still remain unclear, Ali suggests that the state's crack down on the Party severely weakened its organization and reach, pushing it back to the political peripheries. After his release in 1954, Zaheer left for India, never to return, and the Communist Party was finally banned in June that year.

- 10 Ali then introduces another key figure, Hasan Nasir, who became one of the first Communist martyrs of the politics of resistance in Pakistan. Nasir who, like Zaheer, belonged to the *ashrafia* class, joined the CPP soon after he arrived in post-Partition Pakistan. In Chapter Five, Ali opens with the letters written by an imprisoned Nasir, in one of which he humbly states that he learned socialism from the laborers with whom he had lived in Karachi (p. 213). Ali discusses "Nasir's life history and the circumstances surrounding his death" to locate "events that were part of the times that he lived in and ... the changes in Communist politics after his death" (p. 215). Nasir's political homeground, Karachi of the 1950s, was then experiencing a boom in industrialization, alongside the simultaneous repression of workers, which gave rise to increased labor unrest and strikes. In 1958, at the time of Field Marshal Ayub Khan's military coup, Nasir was actively involved with the newly formed National Awami Party—a coalition of left-leaning regional, labor and ethnic formations—as its Office Secretary, while at the same time working for the "by now illegal underground Communist Party and trade union movement" (p. 223). Following the imposition of martial law that year, Nasir remained underground, but was finally arrested in August 1960. He was brought to Lahore for interrogation and tortured to death in its infamous Fort. His mother, who arrived in Pakistan in December 1960 to reclaim her son's body, returned empty handed, refusing to accept the decomposed and unrecognizable remains.
- 11 In Chapter Six, Ali takes us to the third and most recent site, Karachi, 1972, and to labor's confrontation with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government. In 1970, Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) managed to come into power through the overwhelming support of Leftist students, labor, and intelligentsia, and amidst their high expectations to restructure capital-labor-state relations. Here, Ali focuses on the labor politics of 1970s Karachi to gain an "understanding of the social and historical processes that have led to the substantive decline of labor and class-based politics and the concurrent emergence of a politics increasingly shaped by issues of ethnic, religious and sectarian differences in contemporary Pakistan" (p. 242). Ali notes the fragmented nature of the labor movement in Karachi, and discusses the organizing and training of workers for radical action during that period of labor activism.
- 12 From the late 1960s, the labor activists in Karachi had become increasingly active in mobilizing workers across ethnic and industrial divides. In 1969, they won a major victory when the government introduced an "Industrial Relations Ordinance." Emboldened by these successes and by the anti-industrialist rhetoric of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the labor leaders escalated their activism after PPP came into power. Ali tells us that "during the first six months of 1972, periodic lockouts and encirclements of factories continued in the two major industrial areas of Karachi" (p. 250). The workers demanded the "reinstatement of those retrenched during the martial law years, the opening of those industries that the management had closed ... the distribution of bonuses ... and [their] back pay." Increasing labor militancy and confrontation with industrialists finally

reached a boiling point on June 7th, 1972, when workers clashed with the police. Ten died and scores were injured. The crackdown on labor militancy continued after this clash. However, Ali concludes, the PPP government not only “crushed the radicalized movement, but also sought to reconfigure the working class according to its own vision of clientelist politics” (p. 273). This chapter wraps up the drama of Leftist politics in Pakistan in a most lively fashion, as workers themselves speak out about their struggles and the nature of working-class politics in Karachi. A resurgent memory finally confronts the dominant history.

- 13 Kamran Asdar Ali’s *Surkh Salam* makes valuable contributions to mend “selective amnesia” (p. 7) in Pakistan; it introduces us to the agents of an early progressive politics in the country, alongside their motivations and ideals; and further, facilitates an understanding of the nature of the state’s power. That is why the working class politics and formations were considered a threat from the state’s perspective, and how the suppression of class activism and communist politics is very much part of the story of Pakistani state formation, at least of its early years.
- 14 In line with anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1997) efforts to reveal how history can be efficiently silenced, Ali addresses the many deliberate silences in Pakistan’s history, such as the unflinching display of reticence that has followed since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. But, and perhaps, because he reconstructs his story from fragments of a forgotten history, the voices of the agents within this history are only feebly heard and, at times, are felt to be lost in the impressive narrative of the Left in Pakistan. Except for the chapter on labor mobilizations in 1972, in Karachi, in which we actually hear workers’ voices and learn the meanings they ascribed to their struggles, or in the chapters based on the political and literary work of Syed Sajjad Zaheer, Ali struggles to show us what Communism really meant to the marginalized laborers and political workers themselves. Zaheer was, after all, from the social (*ashrafia*) as well as the political elite imported from India, even as he rooted himself in the progressive Left. Is the alternative history that Ali recovers, in fact, a history of the Leftist elite in Pakistan?
- 15 Of course, Ali must be commended for bringing back to life the fragmentary voices that he is able to salvage, as the tracing out and retrieval of archival and other forms of research material on such a subject could be a very taxing and frustrating task. But I wonder if attention to other formations of the Left, such as the Democratic Students Federation—which was also organized and influenced by CPP cadres (Naqvi and Irshad 2014)—and their politics and confrontation with the state in the 1950s, would have helped to sharpen our understanding of the nature of the Pakistani state, and its power and use of violence in its formative years.
- 16 Hasan Nasir’s violent death in 1960 was followed by that of another Communist activist, Nazeer Abbasi, twenty years later. Abbasi was tortured to death by the agents of yet another martial-law regime in Pakistan. Both these deaths mark bloody milestones in the Left’s challenge to the Pakistani state and the state’s violent response to dissent. By the early 1980s, however, General Zia’s regime had plunged Pakistan deep into the Afghan “jihad,” sponsored mainly by the United States and Saudi Arabia. By then, the military regime had also extended state patronage to Islam and Islamist groups, thereby tilting the balance of power to the side of the political and the religious Right in Pakistan. The rise of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan during the mid-1990s, the events of September 11, 2001, the US invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent wave of violence that these events collectively let loose, have made it almost impossible to return to and

recover a progressive past, or to formulate a future political imaginary for Pakistan that is not inspired by the various, extant Islamist forms within popular politics in the country today.³ Kamran Asdar Ali's *Surkh Salam* picks up this formidable challenge by transporting us into a forgotten past of alternative possibilities, and its reading invites, nay, demands, additional bold moves by both intellectuals and political workers in the country, to imagine and struggle for a radically progressive political present in Pakistan.

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NOTES

1. Hamza Alavi (2002) has argued that the *ashrafia* class, specifically the *salariat* amongst them (the government-employed professional Muslims educated in North India) emerged to lead the Pakistan Movement for the Muslim League, after the party's departure from Congress-led Indian nationalism.
2. In the context of the Pakistani left, "liberals" were historically, and even currently to some extent, distinguished from the "progressives" because of their nationalist, but more significantly, non-Communist politics. These divisions/claims have taken on a new life after the fall of Soviet Union and the demise of Communist politics in Pakistan. Moreover many of the liberals are now considered to be the vanguard of a non-governmental, "apolitical," civil society in Pakistan.
3. Although Imran Khan's populist *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) has appealed to a diverse professional, educated middle-class in urban Pakistan, so far it has mainly remained ideologically inspired by the Islamist politics of *Jamaat-e-Islami*.

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