

Protecting the Memory of Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Muslim and Communist

Tuesday 11 September 2018, by [NAEEM Raza](#) (Date first published: 13 May 2018).

Is there anyone in the subcontinent who has remained untouched by the slogan he coined, 'Inquilab Zindabad'?

The problem with historical icons in the Indian subcontinent is that their fate is closely tied to the demands of present-day politics in both India and Pakistan. If the seven decade-long presence of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's portrait at Aligarh Muslim University became an alibi for the Hindu Right in India to create a diversionary issue that could serve their agenda, earlier this week the Pakistani writer and columnist Rauf Parekh ignited another needless dispute on Maulana Hasrat Mohani, the well known Indian communist and freedom fighter.

In his [column in Dawn](#), Pakistan's most-read English-language newspaper, Parekh said that Mohani was "a strange blend of Islam and communism" and described his [attending celebrations of Krishna's birth in Mathura](#) and performing several Hajj pilgrimages to Mecca as "self-contradictory behaviour". Then he goes on to mention the Maulana's membership of the Congress and subsequently the Muslim League, and his 'active membership' of the Progressive Writers Association, but leaves out his long and historic association with the Communist Party of India (CPI).

It is important to set the record straight, and not only because today marks the 67th anniversary of the Maulana's death or that this year is being celebrated as the bicentennial of Karl Marx.

Mohani was one of the founders of the CPI. In 1925, he inaugurated the party's first office in Kanpur and waved the red flag. When the first All-India Conference of Communists was held in Kanpur on December 25-26, 1925, Mohani was the president of the reception committee. Extracts from his welcome address are given below; in this address he had presented a proposal for a Soviet-style constitution for independent India:

"The communist movement is a movement of peasants and workers. The Indian people generally agree with the principles and aims and objectives of this movement, but due to some misunderstandings, a few weak-hearted and easily-intimidated individuals become afraid of the very word 'communism'. Although these misunderstandings have been deliberately spread by capitalists and others who oppose communism. For example, some people think that communism will necessarily take us towards bloodshed and terrorism. The reality of this inaccurate idea is just that we accept non-violence as and when the need for it arises, and like Mahatma Gandhi, do not admit it as some eternal and fixed principle. In the same manner, some people falsely accuse that communism and the conduct of 'What is Yours is Mine' is the same. The reality is that we divide property into two parts, meaning into personal property like a watch, umbrella, utensils, food, clothes, etc. and private property like land, factories, etc. The communist principle only applies to private property, not to personal property.

"The detailed programme of our party which resembles the Soviet Union will be presented in this

conference for deliberation and approval. Our aims and objectives are as follows:

To attain total independence or *swaraj* by all reasonable means. After attaining independence, we will have to see that all those principles which are prevalent in the Soviet Republic should be issued here.

To work for the freedom and prosperity of the peasants and workers even before *swaraj*.

To cooperate with all those parties which assist us in our aforementioned aims and objectives.

To create public opinion in favour of communist principles so that these can be put in practice immediately after attaining *swaraj*.

“Our organisation is purely Indian. Here this clarification is necessary that the sphere of our party is not just limited to India. Our relations will generally be limited to just sympathy and ideological harmony with other comradely parties outside the country, especially the Third International. On this path, we are their fellow travellers, but not beholden to them. Neither can we give them practical help, nor do they extend us any financial assistance.

“Some ill-disposed individuals accuse communism of being a necessarily anti-religious movement. Although the truth of the matter is that in the matter of religion our attitude is extremely tolerant and generous. Every person who accepts our principles can join our party whether he is a Muslim or Hindu, Christian or Buddhist, atheist or devout. In other words, we accept all religions and also consider unbelief as a religion. Some of our Muslim leaders un-necessarily present communism as an opponent of Islam, although the reality is totally opposite. For example, Islam opposes capitalism even more forcefully than the communist ideas.”

Mohani used to say, “I was initially a nationalist. In 1925, I abandoned this idea and adopted the principles of communism. Now I am a communist.”

He wrote many articles in support of socialism in the journal *Urdu-e-Mualla*, including ‘What Does Socialism Want?’, ‘The Development of Russia’s New Generation’, ‘Pandit Nehru and Socialism’, ‘Socialism and Maulana Azad’ and ‘Islam and Socialism’.

Syed Sibte Hasan, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Pakistan, as if to anticipate and answer Rauf Parekh’s objections, summed up the Maulana’s persona back in 1970 with the following words:

“Sometimes I think that Maulana Ehtishamul Haq Thanvi, Maulvi Maududi and other venerable sages of this tribe who cannot even bear to hear the name of socialism and give fatwas of infidelity and apostasy on socialism, where were they in the period when Maulana Hasrat Mohani used to openly call himself a Muslim communist and publicly spoke in favour of communism. Despite this, neither the ulema of Deoband called him an infidel, nor the muftis of Farangi Mahal gave a fatwa of apostasy and unbelief on him.

Even then, I think if Maulana Hasrat Mohani was amongst us today, which group or party would he support, the conscience-selling mullahs who swear by the sacredness of private property and advocate feudalism and capitalism, or the socialists who fight for the rights of workers?

This crusading man never weighed his conduct in the scales of profit and loss; nor reconciled the voice of his conscience with the compromises of time. He neither had a house nor car, neither shares in factories nor shops and permits. His pocket was empty but his heart was generous. He was the Abuzar Ghaffari of the 20th century, and obviously could never have been a eulogist of Muawiya and Marwan.”

A restless soul, the Maulana joined the Congress, and later the Muslim League too. He was also an important member of the Progressive Writers’ Association. A member of the Constituent Assembly, he broke with Jinnah and the Muslim League over their insistence that India be partitioned. When the Constitution of India was drafted, however, he refused to sign it, as he believed it should have been drafted by the genuine representatives of the people of India and not those who were privileged enough to have the right of franchise during British rule.

For Maulana Hasrat Mohani, what some today see as his “contradictory behaviour” was for him the essence of what he believed being a Muslim, a communist, an Indian and a human being was all about.

*Gandhi ki tarah baith ke kaatenge kyun charkha
Lenin ki tarah denge duniya ko hila hum*

(Why should we sit and spin yarn on the charkha like Gandhi
Like Lenin we will shake the world)

The younger generation of Indians and Pakistanis may not know his name and what he stood for. But is there anyone in the subcontinent who has remained untouched by the slogan he coined, ‘Inquilab Zindabad’?

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