

Obituary

Pakistan: Farewell, dear comrade - Manzoor-ul-Hussain passed away

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Aima Khosa remembers a stalwart of the 20th century communist movement.



Why do great men die and leave us lesser mortals to piece together the stories of their lives so that that the world can understand the significance of their beliefs and their struggles? Indeed, narrating someone's life in a few words is a great responsibility and one can be forgiven for feeling completely unprepared for this moment; sharing some vignettes from the life of Comrade Manzoor-ul-Hussain who passed away on Sunday.

Com. Manzoor was among the generation of activists who were politicized during General Ayub's regime. He emerged on the scene like many others - as a young student and later went on to become a labour leader. He led strikes in factories of Karachi in the 1970s and later joined the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) against General Zia. For a brief period in the 1990s, Com. Manzoor was an office-bearer in the Awami National Party. He also organized among intellectuals and was part of the Professors Group. He also edited several newspapers and magazines during his lifetime.

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These are just the core details of his life - things that I discovered about him in passing, through other comrades and through his own anecdotes. I always told him that I wanted to write his memoirs and that we should sit down some time. He would smile and say, "Any time. Just come over." I didn't go because Com. Manzoor, a man of immense dignity and quiet grace, always appeared stoic and strong. He never let on that he was ill, or suffering. I, like many others, foolishly thought we had many more years with him. We needed to believe this because we needed his wisdom and his patience in these difficult times.

When news of Com. Manzoor's passing broke, a number of young activists came out with similar observations. Many spoke of his gentle demeanour, others mentioned his sense of humour and how he could find a moment to share a laugh with anyone.

Academic and progressive activist Dr Ammar Ali Jan noted: “We are fast losing giants of an entire generation. Other than Asma Jahangir and Manzoor Sahib, we have also lost Fanoos Gujjar, Fehmida Riaz and Nigar Ahmad (among others) this past year. These people embodied the idealism of a bygone-era, when the possibility of a different world was still on the horizon. They lived their lives as champions, indifferent to the suffocating logic of the world, and always ready to transform the anxiety of uncertainty into hope for a better tomorrow. These are the real heroes of our land and we will be a much more optimistic society if the younger generation chooses to connect with the glorious legacy left behind by these exemplary individuals.”

Sharing his memories of Com. Manzoor, Journalist Sher Khan wrote, “He never profited from the Left, was never opportunistic and always had this glaring optimism that if we organized and worked hard we could make an impact.”

Journalist Ziyad Faisal wrote, “Every time I face despair – when it seems that progressive values and popular-democratic struggles are going nowhere – a number of faces will always flash by my mind’s eye. Comrade Manzoor with his indomitable, warm smile will be top of that list of faces.”

Although my great regret remains that I did not spend enough time with him to learn from him all that he could teach us, I am proud to have known him during the final years of his life. We connected because Com. Manzoor was never afraid of an adventure. He had grown tired of the infighting between micro-parties of the Left and was always excited by the burst of energy young people brought to any movement or organization. And so when some young people went to him for support for Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement (HKM), he did not hesitate for a second. “Let’s do it comrade,” he said, his voluminous eyes brimming with intent and enthusiasm.

He observed silently when young activists around him sorted out their projects. He must have been amused or frustrated by their quarrels, but he never said a word. He was full of wisdom, always sincere in his advice and exuded great warmth in every interaction. It was clear to us that this was a man who did not carry any bitterness in his heart and that allowed him to continue moving forward with his project of dignity, equality and emancipation.

He was not only happy to teach, he was also very keen to learn. He always showed up at any reading group, or protest, or meeting he was invited to. In his last days, he was working with the Punjab Urban Resource Center in Lahore and felt very strongly about the emerging water crisis in this country. He shared PURC’s data with activists, held countless seminars and in summer 2018, braving the oppressive heat in Ramazan, organized the Paani Do, Vote Lo (Give Water, Get Votes) campaign with HKM activists in working class neighborhoods of Lahore.

As we bid farewell to Com. Manzoor, it is important for us to remember the causes close to his heart. Fighting an unjust order and struggling for rights of others without seeking any personal benefits requires a humble disposition and a mighty heart. Manzoor Sahib had all these qualities, and many more. Those who have known him understand that there are many lessons he taught us through his acts of kindness and solidarity. Com. Manzoor will live on as long as we draw inspiration and strength from the memories we made with him. May he rest in peace.

Aima Khosa

P.S.

- The Friday Times, February 15, 2019:
<https://www.thefridaytimes.com/farewell-dear-comrade/>
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