

Pakistan: Radical demands of the 1960s and lessons for our present

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Picture: jamhoor

Student and worker movements took place across the world in the late 1960s. So the fact students and workers across Pakistan also came out on to the streets in the same period is not particularly remarkable. However, historian Srinath Raghavan goes so far as to say that, “the uprising in Pakistan was arguably the most successful of all the revolts in that momentous year.” Now this claim is remarkable! For Raghavan, the success of this movement can be measured by the fact that the military dictator it targeted, General Muhammad Ayub Khan, was forced to step down.

However, this essay argues that what was most remarkable about this movement is how radical its demands were. Its success can then be measured in how Pakistani workers, by 1969, believed that they had won. They believed that the factories could be taken over, land would go to the tiller and so on.

An anecdote from this time is narrated by Philip Jones in his book *The Pakistan People's Party: Rise to Power (2003)*, where he discusses how, during the movement, poorer people walked around the rich residential areas of Gulberg and pointed out the houses that would be theirs after the revolution. Focusing on Ayub Khan or the Pakistan People's Party (which won the election in 1970 and then dominated this portion of Pakistani history) blunts the radical message of this time.

The people of Pakistan were not articulating demands as Pakistanis alone. They were articulating an agenda for what freedom meant. There were no spies and no enemy agents who were forcing them to believe one thing or another. They, and the recently decolonised peoples across the world, were taking on their governments, taking on American imperialism and articulating a belief in a world that was more equal. It is possible to argue that what was remarkable about the ideas in circulation in the first half of the 20th century is how open political imaginations were. This does not mean that a revolution in which workers took over the factories and maintained hold of them was ever really on the cards in Pakistan, but workers, students and activists all believed it was. Their actions, their political demands, the organisations they formed were guided by this belief. It was this belief, this faith in the inevitability of revolution that fuelled the conspicuous absence of despair. Any discussion

of the labour movement in Pakistan cannot divorce itself from this very basic fact.

Why discuss the labour movement in Pakistan at all? Why does it matter that the movement of the 1960s had a radical agenda? It matters because it tells us that our political inheritance as Pakistanis was not just determined by one political party, or by a small segment of Sindh centuries ago. It tells us that as Pakistanis, we shared demands with radicals across the world. These demands were not just those of English-speaking elites, but were articulated by workers and labour leaders. For instance, an excellent account recently written by Ahmad Azhar, traces how the workers of Mughalpura were, from the interwar period onwards, independent from the pressures of nationalist elites and political parties. Their concerns as workers almost always came first, something that would not have been possible if they had not been such a strong, organised and politically important force in Lahore.

Identity and Links

Worker demands for inclusion and autonomy have been written out of Pakistan's history, but they were there from the very beginning. Indeed, one of the main demands of workers in the late 1960s movement was to have class-based representation in the National Assembly. The qualification to have a BA is, by contrast, an elitist demand. This was a radical demand. Indeed, a look across the sorts of demands that were articulated during the later 1960s in Pakistan shows that workers and students were linking their ideas of freedom to a demand for nationalisation of industries, while also demanding the end of American imperialism. In the context of the late 1960s, these demands were seen as legitimate and workers within their neighbourhoods became considerably powerful as a result of this movement.

Two years ago, I wrote a piece about an important labour leader in Lahore whose notoriety can be measured by how strongly workers in the city reacted to his death in 1974. Abdur Rahman, described as a larger than life figure, was fascinating to me because everyone I interviewed for my PhD thesis, which focused on the labour movement in Lahore, and every story I followed in the archive to the early 1970s somehow touched on the life and murder of this iconic figure.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that his death shut the city down in a way that can only be compared in our contemporary period to the way Karachi reacted to the death of Benazir Bhutto. However, the more interesting story is perhaps not about the man Abdur Rehman himself (though that is a fascinating story in and of itself), but what the rest of the sources tell us about the time—about the 1960s and Pakistan's early years. In the case discussing his murder, the judges of the high court talked about the power that workers had, and how all employers were wary of upsetting them.

Compare this to the contemporary period, where employers have the right to hire and fire at will. Not only did workers have this power within the context of the factory, it extended into their neighbourhoods as well, where they were able to force their neighbourhood police to be answerable to them. This is crucial because it points to the fact that increasing the power of workers can allow for institutions to become more accountable. No matter how many laws and protective legislation the country comes up with, implementation is only possible if workers themselves have the organisational strength to run and regulate them. There can be no real worker protection without a labour movement and in the late 1960s, workers believed in their right to organise and be part of a labour movement.

Crucial to the labour movement's organisational strength in the 1960s was also its strong links with students and other groups. Abdur Rehman was present at study circles also attended by students across Lahore's universities. Part of what made him so powerful was that the labour movements of

the late 1960s were supported by students and activists across Lahore. As these groups met regularly with workers, they all got to know and support one another. This support was not just expressed through messages of solidarity, but through concrete political action.

For instance, 1969 in Kot Lakhpat saw several 'labour camps' take place where students, lawyers, politicians (both men and women) came to support workers' strikes for days at a time. This was what labour politics meant. To meet people, to know one another, to show solidarity.

When we are told in Pakistan that politics is not the business of students, we are confusing following party lines with politics. Ideological nit-picking is definitely not the business of students, but building community, getting to know the people you live with and their demands is an essential part of education. Something that this chapter of Pakistan's history makes clear. You cannot, in other words, have a strong labour movement that does not have links with a strong student movement, women's movement, and so on.

Indeed, in the 1960s in Pakistan, intelligence reports refer to prominent women like Tahira Mazhar Ali and Begum Shamim Ashraf Malik, but there is also evidence that other women leaders and worker labour leaders were central in this time period. Last year, I spent some time in the Punjab Police (Special Branch) Archives and found several mentions of women leaders in areas like Bahawalpur, who addressed worker gatherings and were clearly important enough to be noted down (by name) by intelligence officials. However, beyond this source, the trail of historical evidence that could have uncovered who they were runs cold.

The point I am making here, however, is that the fact that women were involved in the labour movement is an important part of understanding how working class women were central in the struggle in a way that even progressive historians often tend to miss.

The work of scholars like Cynthia Enloe (amongst others) alerts us to the fact that what we consider to be serious or worthy of being the proper subject of history, is often a result of our own bias. We tend not to look in the right places. We tend to not ask the right questions. I spent so much time during my fieldwork days interviewing men, talking to men and just accepting it when their wives said they did not know much. The ways in which we think are crafted from years of socialisation. What do we consider worthy of knowing? We are taught this answer through our school curriculums, through what we hear our parents talk about and the behaviours we observe. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Pakistanis are taught to disregard radical politics as being antithetical to who we are. One of the crucial lessons of the 1960s and its many histories is that demands for gender equality and a more welfare-oriented state are very much part of our intellectual inheritance as Pakistanis.

Internationalism of Pakistani Workers

International links were important to workers and students in the late 1960s. These were expressed through shows of solidarity. For instance, the death of Patrice Lumumba and the Vietnam War saw student protests take place across Pakistani universities. They were, even then, very clear on the fact that they supported demands for freedom across the newly decolonised world. These global ideals sat alongside expressions of the local demands, so these same students were demanding better hostel and classroom conditions, even while they were attending anti-Vietnam war protests. One of my favourite anecdotes from this time period was narrated by Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan, who had invited a group of Vietnamese women who had been fighting against the American army to speak to a gathering of workers in Lahore. The women came to the front of the gathering. They seemed soft spoken and diminutive, so when they spoke and sat down the workers did not quite

know how to react. Tahira then went to the front and yelled, “These women fought the Americans! They took down six foot tall Americans who were attacking the Vietnamese!” and suddenly the crowd got to its feet. Cheers and applause reverberated through the hall. This incident meant conveyed to me was a sense of how the world outside Pakistan and outside the factory managed to enter the world of labour in ways that are not entirely visible to us.

Who knew that workers in Lahore actually met a group of Vietnamese guerrilla fighters? The networks between students, activists and labour meant that demands and meanings were constantly circulating, deepening the world of politics and possibilities.

The radical promise of the late 1960s did not deliver. The reasons for why the dreams of revolution were not fulfilled merit analysis and debate. However, it is essential to begin by noting and commemorating the fact that indeed these dreams existed. The demands of radicals of the time are a part of the political history of Pakistan. Centring the importance of workers and the demand for social and economic equality is the only way to truly commemorate the struggles of those who, in the late 1960s, thought a better, more equal future for Pakistan was possible.

Anushay Malik

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P.S.

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• **Anushay Malik** is a visiting faculty member of History and Labour Studies at Simon Fraser University