

Does the Pakistani left understand working class people?

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A lively discussion commenced on the Left after I posted a poster from our campaign which paid tribute to Imam Hussain (A.S). The poster was made by a working class comrade from the constituency who requested that I put it on my wall. It was no surprise to me that some elements, without trying to understand any context, began attacking the photo as a sign of betrayal. Their ignorance is symptomatic of a deeper malaise in Pakistani Marxism, one that stems from an intense alienation from mass culture and popular politics.

To begin with, there are two different levels at which Marxism operates i.e. the theoretical and the historical. Dialectical materialism in theory gives us a method to grasp society in its contradictions, particularly class struggle as the motor for humanity's progress. History gives us a concrete sense of the social relations, state structure, geopolitics, cultural expressions and political conflicts in a given situation. What is practice? It is the use of theory to understand a concrete situation in order to transform it. In other words, Marxism is the practice of transforming the world from the perspective of the exploited classes.

This task is very different from the philosophers of the enlightenment era who thought rational contemplation can lead individuals towards Reason. On the contrary, Marxism talks about transforming society, a collective process in which the masses are both students of the philosophers but also their teachers, since it is masses and not great individuals who make history. In other words, without connecting with mass consciousness, "revolutionaries" are no better than 19th century liberal thinkers, arrogant about their own "enlightenment" while looking down upon the masses as foolish and irrational.

This is the reason why a host of socialist thinkers have tried hard to develop a PRACTICE OF MARXISM that speaks to the historical consciousness of the masses. One of the most important proponents of understanding mass culture was Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Writing from the dungeons of Mussolini's fascist regime, he implored Marxists to pay attention to mass culture and historical details within Italian history. His theory of hegemony became a vehicle for understanding a vast range of social/cultural practices that had been ignored by the Left including schools, churches, sports clubs, cultural festivals etc. Culture was a key site of the class struggle, and without connecting with it, the fascists would always get an easy walk over against the Left.

Gramsci's ideas were already in practice in revolutionary movements around the globe. In Lenin's Soviet Union, the state developed an elaborate relationship with Muslims in Central Asia, giving them religious freedom, Shariat courts, and terming the Bolshevik Revolution as a defender of Muslims' religious practices. Indian Muslims such as Maulvi Barkat Ullah and Shaukat Usmani, who lived in Soviet Central Asia, have written detailed accounts of how both Islam and Marxism were used simultaneously to defeat feudalism in Central Asia. Similarly, at the Baku Conference in 1920, the Soviet Union announced support for Muslims "Jihad" against British Colonialism. This was not "Islamic socialism" but the attempt to develop a language in which rebellion against colonialism and

feudalism could be expressed in popular language across the Muslim world. In other words, it was an amalgamation of theory with concrete history in order to develop a popular practice of Marxism suitable to Central Asia in the 1920s.

This method was repeated throughout the history of the Communist Movement. For example, Mao used the ancient philosophy of Taoism in the Chinese Revolution just as Deng Xiaoping used the philosophy of Confucius. Neither was a Taoist or a Confucian, but they used the locally rooted language in order to clarify their debates to the masses. Similarly, the Vietcong was in alliance with Buddhists in Vietnam during the American occupation of the country since Buddhism was the most potent cultural expression of the Vietnamese peasants. Instead of hurting their sensibilities, they decided that in order to win the war of liberation, they must connect with this mass consciousness, particularly with elements in it that are closer to Marxist theory of rebellion against the system.

We see similar tendencies across Latin America where liberation theology plays a key role in guiding Marxist action. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua gained their strength from a combination of Marxism and Christianity, a theory known as Liberation Theology. Similarly, Hugo Chavez always stated that his sense of justice stems not from Marx but from Christ and Simon Bolivar, i.e. from religion and patriotism. But Chavez ended up being more influential in rebuilding global socialism than the hundreds of tiny Trotskyite groups who can only debate the pitfalls of Stalinism but have absolutely no worth in transforming the world.

We can give more examples, but this should suffice for now. The question is why in Pakistan do we have a Left that is allergic to any reference to cultural expressions? They give examples of Russia, China and Latin America, where religious/pre-revolutionary cultural expression were widely used. Then why is their own practice extremely divergent from the concrete struggles/policies in those countries?

The answer is that the Left in Pakistan was thwarted in its early years which meant that it never became a mass phenomenon in society, i.e. it never became a political force in the country. This led to its retreat into a politics of purity i.e. trying to stay as pure to Marxist theory as possible. Naturally, any genuine political process will alter theory and its purity. Lenin's revolution was nothing like Marx imagined, just like the Chinese revolution was nothing like the Russian Revolution, and the Bolivarian Revolution (Chavez) was nothing like China, and so on. Practice always transforms theory by smuggling into it elements from specific history, elements that the original theory may not have considered.

Some sections of the Pakistani Left are stuck in the logic that if reality does not correspond to theory, then too bad for reality, we will stick to theory. This begins a process of purging anything that disturbs their tiny theoretical universe, including their comrades when they reach a number over 100 members. The recent splits in some Left organizations is testimony of this politics of purity. Hegel called this the "beautiful soul", a soul that is so terrified of losing its purity that it refuses to enter society, thus becoming irrelevant in history.

There are a few names to this brand of Left politics. "Academic Marxism", as it sticks to theory but cuts itself off from reality. One can also call it "aesthetic Marxism" in which cultural criticism of society trumps political connection with the masses, a form in which revolutionaries turn into wannabe Saadat Hassan Manto (Manto was a great cultural critic, but he was no political organizer). Finally, one can call it spectatorial Marxism in which revolutionaries become "radical critics" of everything, and there is competition (and splits) between them over who has a more radical take on a given situation. Yet, none of their takes move the public, who could not care less for their existence. In other words, Marxists become spectators in history, hoping that the fall of a political regime will move the masses towards them, only to be disappointed by the masses who ignore them

again and again.

It is not, however, the fate of the Pakistani Left to remain on the margins of society forever. We can't contend ourselves with remaining irrelevant. We will remain tiny groups of disgruntled men unless we leave this theological and puritan view of politics. We must remember that human beings are not born in order to confirm our theories. If necessary, we have to change both our practice and our theory to build a mass alternative in politics.

To conclude, religious expression is part of all societies across the world. It will not be wished away. All successful communist movements have engaged with religious expression in order to build a mass alliance against fascist forces. Pakistan will be no different. What differentiates us from fascists is that we do not use religion to divide people but go to mosques, Imam Bargahs, temples and Churches to connect across the religious divide. We do not emphasize the message of accepting suffering in the world but find examples from our religion, history and culture of rebellion against tyranny. We do not use any card to strengthen the state but to unite popular forces against the neocolonial nature of the state. We do not promise Shariah but use examples from our past to put forward the case for land reforms, anti-imperialism and social emancipation. We don't reject religion, we reject theocratic states and religious fundamentalisms.

It's time the Left comes out of its purity obsession and engages with popular consciousness. The political vacuum is large and we can fill it. We will make mistakes in the process, just like in any creative process. But to change the people, we must be willing to change ourselves and to take risks. Otherwise, we will remain spectators in history who hate the elites but are perpetually disappointed by the masses, a perspective more suited to cynics than to revolutionaries.

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