



RESEARCH PAPER

Left-Wing Farmers Activism (1947-70) in District Toba Tek Singh

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ABSTRACT

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This research paper seeks to trace the development of left ideology among the farmers of district Toba Tek Singh with a special reference to the historic 'Kisan Conference'. The left wing activism in Pakistan has not been given a due share in the official annals of history due to multiple factors. The foremost factor seemed to be the fear of the egalitarian and humane outlook of the left parties and groups which made the state scared of these outfits since its early days. The barrage of problems in the wake of the blood-soaked partition of the subcontinent of 1947 shattered the initial euphoria of the common people as the dawn they were waiting for was nowhere to be seen. The state of despondency and disappointment in the people who lost their dear ones as well as their belongings in the aftermath of the partition. The state of Pakistan wanted to keep a check on the activities of the left-wing workers as they launched their activities for the betterment of the common people of Pakistan right after 1947. Many important leaders were arrested and put behind the bars without any charge and in the wake of the mysterious Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case of 1951 the Communist Party of Pakistan was banned and a crackdown was unleashed against its workers across the country. But despite the gigantic odds and gargantuan obstacles, left workers didn't give up as they continued their activities while remaining underground to escape arrests and other dictatorial tactics. Not only the urban workers and laborers but peasantry also waged an incessant struggle against landlordism and their highhandedness in Pakistan.

Introduction

This study tries to trace down the struggle of the farmers for their rights in Pakistan and especially the area of Toba Tek Singh has been selected due to its left-oriented history as it produced a great number of top left leaders for decades. These workers and their long struggle earned an epitaph 'Stalingrad of Pakistan' for district Toba Tek Singh. The historic and monumental congregation of the farmers there in 1970 turned out to be a historic step for the left-wing in the country. Even today the left workers and activists nostalgically remember the event as they decipher it as their finest hour to date. We will briefly trace the activities of the farmers since 1947 to raise

the issues of the poor farmers so that the readers get to know how the left workers and peasants waged an impeccable struggle over the decades.

Initial Activism of Farmers

Pakistan came into being on 14th August 1947 and one of the foremost objectives was to allocate equal rights to the people of Pakistan. The Muslims of India feared that after the exit of the British, the Congress and its leaders would dictate their terms to the minority population of India. So one must keep in mind the fact that economic factors played a vital role in the creation of a separate country for the Muslims (Ali, 1983). There was euphoria and hope in the air as the citizens of the newly found state wanted a democratic and egalitarian state. But that was not to be. Due to various factors, many problems propped up within the first years, and the direction of the state couldn't be rightly directed (Khan, 2001). But still, in those initial days, the workers of the left parties not only faced the onslaught of the state but also stood up. From 1948 till 1954 the workers and leaders of the left parties did play a very crucial role in the politics of Pakistan. They didn't get bogged down by the heavy odds and worked hard in students, trade unions, farmers, and people from other walks of life. These six years helped a great deal in shaping the direction of the left-wing in Pakistan. (Minto, 2016). Their approach was very realistic, to say the least. They want all the sections of the society to come forward and that's the reason they brought all the sections of the society on board. The Communist Party was banned in 1954 on frivolous charges at the behest of some foreign powers who didn't want a socialistic and democratic Pakistan. But as we stated earlier, in these earlier six years the left movement gathered quite a bit of momentum and it seemed that they would continue to acquire more and more influence and following among the common people. An important factor that rallied the left workers across the country was that there were few powerful and sane voices in the mainstream media that vocally supported the cause of the left in Pakistan. The role of Progressive Papers Limited and its main media organs, Pakistan Times and 'imroz' not only was instrumental in introducing world-class journalism in the country but much more (Khan, 1997). They always stood with the liberal and progressive parties of the country and offered very realistic and sagacious advice to those who were running the country. So the main media furthered the message of the left workers. Sadly the takeover of the Progressive Papers Limited during the Ayub Era proved to be a disastrous decision for the cause of free speech. (Hasan, 2007). By 1954, the left-wing workers and their supporters were working underground to escape incarcerations and cases. They were working on many fronts and were quite active. There was a 'Kisan Committee' also apart from other wings. The main objective was to attract the oppressed farmers towards its folds and a group of dedicated workers was waging the struggle under the aegis of Ch Fateh Muhammad who later rose to be one of the greatest peasant leaders of the country. As the initial days of Pakistan were full of political instability and turmoil, the workers of the left were on their toes (Khan, 1997). There were few legendary workers who were already active members of the communist party of India. They were very experienced and were already in contact with the common masses of the country. Dr. Muhammad Abdullah was one such leader who worked for the Communist Party of

India and belonged to a small village of Toba Tek Singh in district Faisalabad. Due to the efforts of such selfless workers, the first step was taken. The farmers of the Toba Tek Singh decided to organize a farmer's conference and its main purpose was to appraise the poor farmers of their issues and prepare them for the future struggle. In a small village Chak 405, the first 'Kisan Conference' was organized on 28th March 1948 in which mostly the farmers of the area participated. It was a small gathering in which the leaders and the speakers educated the poor farmers about their issues (Muhammad, 2015). Although it was a small step it did pave way for many great initiatives which took place in the days to come. In Sindh too the farmers were very actively collaborating with the trade union leaders and workers. They were organized by a true son of the soil Haider Baksh Jatoi who became a strong voice of the landless poor farmers. Their condition was worse than an animal and they were working as bonded laborers on the fields of the powerful landlords (Khaddarposh, 2004). Due to the concerted efforts of the workers and farmers, the movement for rights was gaining momentum. But when the party was banned the situation changed very quickly as the workers had to either escape or go off the radar to save their skin. But one thing was quite sure farmers were slowly awakening to the new realities and the official propaganda was losing its grip over the masses as they were now openly questioning the lackluster performance of the government. (Salim, 2017). With such a promising start there was lots of hope on the left-wing as the common people were banking on their vision for an equal, just, and democratic Pakistan. Under these conditions, the message of the left-wing workers was warmly received by the poor people.

Before we proceed further, we need to take stock of the initial years of Pakistan and the vibrant presence of the left-wing. As we have tried to acquaint the reader with the initial trend one must note that the Faisalabad division and its small towns were clearly proving to be shining examples for the other cities. The farmers, under the guidance of workers, were making an all-out effort to fight for their rights. In the next space, we will amply supplement our point with many examples of the activism of the farmers of the area.

The Resilience of Farmers

We briefly described the rise of the farmers of Pakistan by especially focusing on Toba Tek Singh city and its villages as they were peopled by many well-wishers of the Communist Party. Luckily their message was avidly received by the local people and leaders like Ch Fateh Muhammad, Ch Sharif, and Dr Abdullah gave a fillip to the movement. As early as in March 1948, the farmers managed to convene a conference in their area which was a clarion call for the days to come. They decided not to sit idle and that's why the leaders extended their drive to communicate with more and more farmers. There were many issues that were irking the poor farmers and foremost were paying the annual 'Aabyana' tax to the government officials. These officials would harass the poor farmers. Under these stiff conditions, naturally, the farmers felt attracted towards the left ideology (Muhammad, 2016). As the response was more than encouraging, the party workers decided to organize another convention of the farmers in the Toba Tek Singh city in 1950. This time the organizers were focusing to attract more farmers and they started visiting the different villages of the whole

district Faisalabad (Lyallpur at that time). There was a euphoria and dedication among the workers and the leaders. Everyone wanted to make it a big show as they were trying to occupy political space in the district. A systematic process was set in motion as party workers and farmers took it upon themselves to do the various chores. A donation drive was also launched and the well-to-do farmers were approached (Ali, 1983). The response as we stated earlier was exceptional as many people generously donated for the conference. Another realistic decision was carried out by the party as regards the exact venue of the conference. The party was of the view that the party's influence was well entrenched in the villages. Many villages had a sizeable number of workers and well-wishers of the Communist Party. Many leaders suggested holding the conference in a village Chak 242 which was not far from the city. The decision was also made to invite delegates from the other cities. The leaders of the trade union were also engaged and requested to come earlier to help the local organizers. Thus the conference wasn't a local affair after all as the left stalwarts like C.R Aslam and celebrated trade union leader Mirza Ibrahim also reached a few days earlier. The workers and the farmers had launched a door-to-door campaign and thus more and more people got to know about the upcoming event. Pamphlets were also distributed among a large number of people. The official administration of the city was also trying to create restrictions on the activities of the farmers. They were being frisked and harassed and even threatened. (Muhammad, 2016). The government got alerted too and one of the organizers Ghulam Muhammad Qasir was arrested without any charges and his crime was his political activism among the workers and farmers. Police and other officials of the district administration devised a nefarious strategy to create fear among the workers but they failed to put a stop to their activities. Here it would be very interesting to note that leading writers, poets, and intellectuals were also invited to give the conference a composite look. People like Mazhar Ali Khan (noted journalist and later editor of Pakistan Times), Ahmad Rahi (leading Punjabi poet), Safdar Mir (left ideologue and journalist), Arif Abdul Mateen, and many others attended the conference which was held on 2nd March 1950 in a village near Toba Tek Singh city. The main agenda of the conference was the uplift of the poor farmers and the demand for pro-farmer legislation. There was also emphasized by the leaders that in the nascent state like Pakistan the left-wing shouldn't resort to armed struggle as the society wasn't that advanced. Another very important point was that the left parties need to take all the other like-minded parties, board, for some common cause. The conference lasted two days and thousands of farmers actively attended it and volunteered to make it a success. Despite the heavy odds and the official highhandedness, the conference was an eye-opener for those reactionary forces who were trying to divide the people by invoking the name of religion. But the common folks were no more willing to be fed on fake propaganda against the leftists. The various issues at the local and national levels contributed to the changing mood of the farmers. The loot and plunder by the powerful individuals and bureaucracy after 1947 opened the eyes of the common people who landed in Pakistan by paying a heavy price. They left behind their valuable properties and other belongings for the sake of their country. The plunder and illegal allotments of properties caused a widespread disenchantment among the general public. (Salim, 2005). There were millions of people who were waiting for the transfer of the legal property to Pakistan and they

were being fleeced by the corrupt state officials. A big chunk of the immigrants were farmers who came from East Punjab and were forced to abandon their homes. They were awaiting a new beginning in the new country where they could live their lives freely. The rampant corruption and irregularities greatly disillusioned the farmers. Few influential families were ruling the roost as far as allotment was concerned. Few families greatly benefitted and got innumerable properties allotted to them. (Amiruddin, 1976).

It was not about organizing the meetings or conventions only. Political activism was much more than that. The leaders knew that off and on contact with people could badly damage their stature. So it was decided to deal with the day-to-day issues of the locals. There arose many issues and the leaders and workers tried to side by the cause of the farmers whenever it was needed. The workers stationed themselves at the Faisalabad office of the party and had a strong cadre put in all the adjoining cities. The real test case for the workers appeared when the poor peasants were forcibly evicted from their lands. As they knew about the activities of the left-wing they decided to knock on their door for help. The party leaders assured them of full support. A campaign was launched against the callousness of the officials who evicted farmers. Local and main media was also approached to apprise them of the situation. Due to these efforts the administration took notice of the situation some remedial steps were taken. But these were cosmetic in nature. However, due to the growing reach and popularity of the left-wing leaders, the administration launched a systematic crackdown against them. Many of the top leaders were put behind the bars. One of the vocal leaders Ch Sharif and Fateh Muhammad was also taking part in the elections which further alerted the officials. Every attempt was made to reject their papers. The Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case gave the government a perfect excuse to target the left workers (Zaheer, 1998). So most of the workers were jailed and those who escaped arrests decided to lay low for a while. The resilience and steadfastness of the workers kept the party and its cadres functioning as their spirits were high owing to their growing appeal among the people. The secret meetings continued at different venues in which programs were finalized for future ventures. Pamphlets and other socialist literature were published discreetly and then sent to various areas for educating the common people and farmers. Another very important step was holding the study circles in villages in which they would be enlightened about the importance of farmers in the struggle for a left revolution in any country. In these study circles, the plight of farmers under the Tsarist regime would be discussed. The farmers were advised by the workers that they could also change their plight like their Russian comrades by breaking the shackles of slavery and deprivation. These meetings or study circles impressed the farmers greatly and more and more villagers attended them. Many villagers invited the leaders to hold the meetings in their villages. Thus a series of activities went on despite the draconian measures of the government.

Gaining the Momentum and Impact

The resilience paid off and many other areas and the farmers there felt jubilated about the movement of the left farmers and workers. It wasn't a small feat as the party wasn't allowed to work and its leaders were jailed. But these obstacles

didn't deter the determination of the party. Here I would like to bring to notice the case of Multan which was a stronghold of the landed aristocracy. Here the farmers stood up against the injustice and cruelty of the landlords and slowly the resistance matured into a movement. The administration and the feudal didn't afford an uprising there. A spate of evictions followed which aggravated the situation further. The farmers retaliated and the party workers fully supported the movement and writers and poets visited these farmers to show solidarity with them. A meeting was called there which was stopped by the Police but the venue was shifted to another location (Bashir, 2004).

These activities didn't go in vain at all. The government was under immense pressure and the activism of the leftists and farmers was getting momentum. There was a threat of full-fledged uprising of the farmers (Muhammad, 1975). It was decided by the government to change the strategy as they realized that the left workers couldn't be contained by the use of force. The patience and steely resolve of the workers exasperated the government. A different strategy was devised and a few steps were carried out to appease the farmers. Through an ordinance, the government made it mandatory to seek the opinion of the court before the eviction of the farmers. (Malik, 2017). Although the decision was aimed at dividing the farmers it showed that the government was fearful of the popularity of the leftists and their pro-farmer program. The time was ripe for further activities and another gathering was planned in a small city Gojra where the local farmers complained of eviction. The party workers already knew about the situation and also stood side by side with them. When the situation was getting very intense and the disenchantment among the farmers was running high, a big public meeting was announced to be held in Gojra on 30th October 1952. The party workers reached Gojra city a month earlier and took stock of the whole situation. The number of farmers who got evicted was too many and all were contacted for their support for the meeting. Within no time a large number of people showed a willingness to attend the meeting and a novel way that introduced to attract more public. A play was enacted on the day which highlighted the woes of the farmers. This street play was hit and common people quickly learned the underlying message of the play. Many top leaders like, Mian Iftikharuddin, Mirza Ibrahim, Ghulam Muhammad Londkhor, Safdar Mir spoke on the occasion. The speakers denounced the cruelty of the government which was ridding the people of their lands. The speakers also fully supported the demands of the farmers and the main newspapers of Lahore carried reports of the gathering. The main demand of the speakers as well as the participants was to stop evicting people and in provide them with substitute land if they were evicted. (Minto, 2016). Once the momentum was gained there was no looking back. The farmer committee of Faisalabad was so active and vibrant that farmers liked to interact with them. They were very friendly, accessible and people from their own area. On 16th February 1953, another conference was held in a small town Pir Mahal, almost half an hour away from Toba Tek Singh. Many important leaders spoke on the occasion and a play 'Mazaray Ka Gher' (House of the Farm Worker) was enacted to great applause. This time the farmers went a step ahead and they threatened to siege the provincial assembly building if their demands weren't met. (Muhammad, 2016). These string of gatherings and conferences put the

government on the back foot and they took up steps to pacify the aggrieved farmers. This was only possible due to the immense pressure of the farmers under the aegis of left workers.

The Historic Farmers Conference (1970) of Toba Tek Singh

After the struggle of the initial years, left-wing politics went in various phases in which parties went into many changes. Many new factions and fronts appeared and at times it seemed that the left workers were disillusioned and rudderless. Many top farmer leaders joined National Awami Party which was formed in 1957 as a liberal and secular force with a socialistic program. However, this party too split and two factions came into being. One faction was being led by revered Bengali leader Maulana Abdul Haamid Bhashani who wielded immense influence in Pakistan. The leaders with him once again became active in 1963 when they formed Kisan Committees' to organize the farmers of West Pakistan (Naqvi, 2014). They visited almost the entire country and got in touch with farmers and apprised them of their program. A big gathering was held in Quetta and later in Dhaka on 19th January 1970 under the aegis of Maulana Bhashani. It was there that the leaders decided to hold a national level conference on 23rd March in Toba Tek Singh. The onus on the shoulders of the workers was mammoth but they had plenty of experience in organizing such ventures. The second factor was that in Toba Tek Singh and its nearby villages a big number of left farmers were already working. But the arrangements for the groundbreaking conference were started off in a systematic way and more than eight thousand rupees were pooled for the expenses. (Salim, 2013). A well-wisher of the party booked an entire train for all the participants which would drop them at the venue without charging a penny. People started arriving on 21st March and the whole atmosphere was that of a country fair. A big number of people from across the country were reaching the city and the residents of the city offered them food and accommodation. A big number of workers from the industrial city Faisalabad attended it also to show solidarity with the farmers. The most anticipated and sought-after personality was Maulana Bhashani who was coming to grace the occasion. The whole city was wearing a jubilatory look and people were more than eager to welcome the guests from all over the country. The railway station of Toba Tek Singh was wearing a festive look like a great number of people gathered there to have a glimpse of the guests. In the meanwhile to attract more people and to spread the message more effectively, a play was also enacted which was hugely appreciated by the audience.

The train which started from Lahore on 22nd March was named 'Kisan Express' and Maulana Bhashani was traveling on the train. The whole passengers were wearing red caps as a mark of respect and honor to the leftwing ideology. The train reached Toba Tek Singh in the evening and a thunderous welcome was accorded to it. People were dying to catch a glimpse of the revered Maulana and his other comrades. He was taken to the house of a local trader whose house was right in front of the venue of the conference. The others who graced the occasion were Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Abid Hasan Minto, Mirza Ibrahim, Rasool Bakhsh Palijo, Meraj Muhammad Khan, Sardar Shaukat Ali, I. A Rahman, Dr. Kaniz Fatima, and many others. At the start of the proceedings Faiz said that he came to the city earlier it was a small

gathering of the farmers. But this time it seemed as if the whole world had gathered here (Marri, 2007). Tariq Aziz noted compere and media person, also spoke on the occasion and demanded to rename the city as 'Kisan Nagar' or the 'City of Farmers' as thousands of farmers all over the country had gathered in the city. Famous Bengali leader Masihur Rehman was also present at the moment. Maulana Bhashani came to the rostrum to thunderous applause. He said that farmers in both the wings of Pakistan are dying of poverty and deprivation as farmers produce the crop by dint of their hard work. But the capitalists get all the financial benefits and eat the cake. He further reiterated the demand that the only way the federation could be saved is to award autonomy to the federating units. (Muhammad, 2016). Malik Meraj Khalid, a veteran leader of the Pakistan People's Party read out the message of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Many delegates spoke on the occasion but the speech of Bhashani was literally the most scintillating phase of the conference. According to independent sources, nearly two lac people attended the conference and one could term it as one of the biggest shows of the leftwing in the history of Pakistan. The mainstream media reported it and paid glowing tribute to the organizers and the people of the city who showed immense hospitability during the conference. Even the BBC reported about the event as its correspondent Mark Tully visited the venue.

The Message of the Conference

As discussed earlier the main focus of the historic conference was to support poor and deprived farmers and to save them from the clutches of the powerful capitalists who were continuously exploiting them. The speakers of the conference emphasized the need of looking into the issues of the farmers as more than 70 percent population belonged to farmers. To make our country self-sufficient and independent, the woes of the farmers needed to be addressed quickly. The main point which was discussed in the conference was that the big landlords and their cohorts need to be reined in to save the country. The big landholdings must be equally distributed among the landless poor people as it would not only solve the menace of poverty but also add to the prosperity of the country. (Marri, 2007). The impact of the conference was so huge that many other parties too had to organize such ventures to lure the people and even reactionary Jamat-e-Islami did so. Otherwise, it played into the hands of the feudal and spewed venom against the leftwing leaders and politics and branded them as 'heretics' for demanding rights. Even Pakistan People's Party hugely benefitted from the conference as it adroitly used the main points of the conference in its election campaign and manifesto (Ejaz, 2020).. The landslide win of the PPP in the 1970, elections were no doubt due to the personal charisma and appeal of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto but he cleverly targeted the woes of the common people. Thus the impact of the conference was far-reaching and to this day the workers and farmers remember the conference. Although farmers organized many conferences in the coming years the 1970s remained a classic venture in its own right. Farmers of the entire country could learn a lot from this historic occasion.

Conclusion

The peaceful struggle of the farmers in Pakistan under the aegis of the leftwing is a story of remarkable defiance and courage. Since the creation of Pakistan, the farmers felt attracted towards the ideology of the leftwing as it demanded the abolition of big landholdings. In the initial years of Pakistan, the Lyallpur district and its adjoining towns had scores of well-wishers and supporters of the leftists. The Communist Party and its leaders focused on this area as a number of farmer conferences were held since 1948. The trend caught on and the local leaders and workers worked hard to mobilize the local farmers by raising their issues. This proved to be very beneficial for the leftists as soon Toba Tek Singh led from the front as it successfully organized a spectacular conference on 23rd March 1970 which stands out as the most distinguished episode of leftwing politics in Pakistan. Many parties emulated the main points of the conference to win accolades among the general masses. Many religious parties also organized such conferences to woo the farmers but to no avail. The struggle bore fruit as well as many times the government took up steps to appease the farmers but the struggle didn't stop. The struggle goes on and on as farmers have stopped giving in. But sadly the left workers and leaders couldn't emulate the success story of Toba in other cities as this would have given them more space and impact to influence the policies. An important aspect of the continuous hard work of the left resulted in the success of some of its members gaining power in the local bodies and even provincial assembly. One of the main leaders of the conference was Ch Fateh Muhammad. His son was twice elected as the chairman of the union council. Another famous left family of the district managed to win three times from the provincial assembly seat. Mian Rafique remained MPA from 2013-18. Another leader of the left party Ch Zubair contested the provincial Assembly seat in 2018 and obtained more than five thousand votes although he didn't spend much on his campaign. Secondly, many women take part in the elections from the district as it exhibits the forwardness and progressiveness of the area. So we can safely state that the overall progressive ambiance produced the conditions for the success of leftist ventures in the area. It positively impacted the area in many ways. All said and done, farmers look back to the conference and wish to follow the steps of their comrades.

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