

# Leftist Literati, Activists: Debating the Idea of Pakistan in Public Arenas

(1947-77)

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**ABSTRACT:** *The emergence and continuation of Pakistan as a non-theocratic state owes much to the appreciation of leftist ideas in public arenas. The leftist intellectuals and activists extensively highlighted some key debates and discussions such as a democratic state, provincial autonomy, minority rights, socio-economic justice, and the idea of an egalitarian society. These discussions showed their deep involvement in influencing Pakistan's political and social development (1947-1977).*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Islam, Left, literati, Nationalism, Public arenas.

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The individual left-wing voices and left literati have contributed tremendously to the broader structure of Pakistani politics. In Punjab, they firmly put up their case through print media and public discussions/gatherings, which in many ways introduced nuances to the understanding of the idea of Pakistan. They advocated progressive ideas through literature, poetry, and writing in newspapers, journals, and other spaces, which in turn inspired society. The left-wing political parties also demonstrated resilience against the anti-democratic policies of the state. These left-wing parties and their associated voices had limited space in electoral politics. However, the mobilization capacity of the left arguably had its visible presence in shaping the identity of the new Muslim state.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars such as Hamza Alvi (Alvi 63), Stephen.P.Cohen (Cohen 74) and Ishtiaq Ahmed (Ahmed 66) suggest that left-wing political parties and activists were marginalized by the broader structures of Pakistan's politics, mainly controlled by the establishment from 1947 onwards. They argue that the left provided minimal space in influencing the construction of Pakistan as it remained a passive actor and failed to capitalize on its idea of Pakistan. Cohen, a scholar of South Asian studies, pointed out that the leftist idea of Pakistan was not compatible with that of establishment as the powerful state's institutional structures, such as military and bureaucracy, wished to see Pakistan free from revolutionary impulses. On the other hand, a group of scholars such as Sadia Toor (Toor 3-4), Anooshay Malik (Malik 25), Kamran Asder Ali (Ali 215) and Tariq Ali (T. Ali 60) highlighted the significant presence of the left in different perspectives of the Pakistani state and society. These scholars highlight the leftist movement in Pakistan, its agenda, ideological commitments, message, and resilience despite some unfavorable realities.

The present work is located in this evolving area of scholarship. Except Sadia Toor, Usmani, and Anooshay Malik, most of the scholarship on the left mainly focuses on its politics and the labor movement. My study will extend the existing scholarship into a new domain: the wider dimension of left ideas in the public arenas of post-colonial Punjab (1947-1977), its intellectual resistance, and how it contributed visibly to enhancing the idea of progressive Pakistan and contested the rightist theocratic vision of the state. My research will highlight the influence of the left on the political and social development of Pakistan. I propose that in Punjab, from a social history perspective, the state was not the only entity

defining the idea of Pakistan and the public arenas was also influential in constructing the idea of Pakistan.

### **Research Methodology**

I employ various primary sources such as leading left-wing newspapers (Pakistan times, Imroze) and magazines (Naqoosh, Lalho-Nihar), and books written during this period (1947-1977). These primary sources carried the views of activists and scholars such as Sajjad Zaheer, Sibte-e-Hassan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mazhar Ali Khan, Abdullah Malik, Ahmed Nadeem Qasami, Habeeb Jalib, Mian Iftikhar ud din, Zaheer Kashmiri and other literati under the left influence. These sources provide insights and various perspectives for studying the idea of Pakistan projected by the left in public arenas between 1947 and 1977. By comparing multiple primary sources on the same issue, I tried to address the problem of biases in the text.

### **Islamic State, Pakistan Nationalism and the Battle of Ideas**

The victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the first Socialist State in Russia significantly boosted the social and political liberation movements throughout the colonial world, including India (Javed XV). All the inspirational forces of Marxist ideology in colonial India organized themselves, and hence the communist party of India (CPI) came into existence in the mid-1920s (K. A. Ali 35). Despite its list of reservations with the All India National Congress, the prevailing suppressive structure of the British colonial Government forced the communist party to align itself with the progressive section within the Congress, such as Jawahar Lal Nehru (1889 – 1964), Subhas Chandra Bose (1897 – 1945) and Jay Parkash Narayan (1902 – 1979) (K. A. Ali 36). In Punjab, it received support from Mian Iftikhar ud Din, Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kitchlew, and Dr. Satyapal, who played a significant role in promoting the left ideas in the British Garrison State (Punjab) (Javed XVII). The CPI-Congress collaboration could help CPI directly connect with India's grassroots politics, such as access to trade unions, working classes in urban areas, peasant organizations and other important sections of society (K. A. Ali 36). Within this context, the communist party of India initially supported Congress's stance on the internal unity of India and collective struggle against the imperialist government and rejected Muslim League's claim to divide India into two nations (Hindu and Muslim) (K. A. Ali 36-37).

However, after passing the Lahore Resolution in 1940, the communist party decided to re-vest the question of Muslim separation in a new context, particularly when, in 1942, the All India National Congress quit the India movement and demanded complete independence of India. All members of the communist party opposed the Resolution of 1942 led by congress regarding the Quit India movement primarily due to the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. The communist party of India reversed its position on world war and called it “an imperialist war to a people’s war” (K. A. Ali 37). It had not only started to support the British (ally of Russian in W.W) but also launched a campaign for Congress – Muslim League unity to bring closer all political parties in India against the fascist position of Hitler and Mussolini (Javed 210).

In the mid-1940s, the Indian Communist Party openly supported the Muslim League’s question of a separate Muslim state, as evidenced in an essay written by Sajjad Zaheer, a member of the central committee of the CPI who later on became the first Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Pakistan and one of the most forceful voices of left in Pakistan after its creation in 1947 (K. A. Ali 44). Sajjad Zaheer visited Lahore in May 1944 and convinced Muslim members of the Punjab Communist Party to join the Muslim League to mobilize it into a mass organization (Javed 210). Sajjad Zaheer had not only started a membership campaign in favour of the Muslim League but also supported the Muslim League’s demand for a separate Muslim state, calling it a “rational expression of the development of political consciousness among Indian Muslims” (K. A. Ali 44). Zaheer and CPI had not only accepted the All India Muslim League’s claim and demand of separate Muslim state but to give it practical shape, Sohan Singh Josh and Danial Latifi met Jinnah in Lahore in April 1944 (Javed 210). On the demand of Muslim League’s leadership, Muslim Communists such as Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din, Danial Latifi, Abdullah Malik, Anis Hashmi, Ch. Rahmat Ullah Aslam, Ata Ullah Jehanian and some others joined the All India Muslim League. The support from the left was a big rescue to Jinnah and Muslim League at a critical juncture when they desperately needed solid rural political support in the Muslim majority province, Punjab, where Unionist stalwarts had a stronghold before the 1945 – 46 elections. The profound impact of left-wing leadership on Muslim politics raised Latifi’s stature within the League in a short period. He became not only office secretary of the Provincial Muslim League of Punjab but also drafted the manifesto of Muslim League Punjab in 1944. (Gilmartin 196) This new alliance between Muslim

League's leadership and communists had different meanings and applications for both groups.

For Muslim League, after the breakup with the Unionists, an alliance with the communists helped increase the party's membership drive in Punjab to legitimize their position as rural leaders. For communists, cooperation with the Muslim League gradually could bring the Muslim League close to the communist ideology. This collaboration could help them directly connect with the grassroots politics of Punjab in rural areas, as argued by Gilmartin (Gilmartin 196). Sajjad Zaheer, the Chief Theorist of League – Communist cooperation, was convinced that despite their landed elite background, the rural League leadership could effectively promote popular rural consciousness in Punjab (Gilmartin 196). The manifesto of Latifi itself reflected one of the most progressive drafts of the Muslim League in pre-partition time. It stressed the state planning of the economy, including nationalization of a few key industrial sectors and banks to ensure the rights of working classes in industries, their minimum wages, progressive taxation on landholders, more space for small land owners, safeguarding of minorities rights, protection of the right to work, health and basic education (K. A. Ali 48). The left-wing support for the Muslim League was based on the assumption that the future Muslim state would have sufficient space for progressive economic actions and ideas. However, the internal challenges within the party, the reversal of their position on the issue of a separate Muslim state in 1948, and the division of the party during the second congress evolved the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) differently in the new state of Pakistan, “where in a majority Muslim state the communists had to gradually re-think entire thesis on the Muslim question” (K. A. Ali 67) as the new land posed both an opportunity and list of challenges to left as argued by Sadia Toor (Toor 52).

The Islamist discourse of the rightist political parties and religious groups was not only resisted by the leftist forces in constitutional terms but equally on cultural and literary fronts. The battle of ideas between the Left and Religious Right over the issue of nationalism, particularly defining the role of Islam in national politics, remained intact among literary critics to influence public arenas. Safder Mir, one of the left's literary critics and most prominent voices, contested the Islamist discourse and ideological interpretation of the religious rightist. By challenging Maududi that Pakistan was not a nation-state but an ideological state, Mir argued that Muslim nationalism drew its inspiration from the enlightenment ideas of modern Europe and most of the Muslim League's

leadership was intellectually impressed and influenced by the modern concepts of the nation-state such as democracy, social justice, equality, liberty and human values (Mir 37). In his work published in the name of “Maududiat Aur Majooda Siaasi Kash Makash” (Maududi-ism and the present political struggle), Safder Mir excavated a few essential references and views regarding the previous position of Maududi on Pakistan in which Maududi was a strong critic of the Muslim League and the idea of Pakistan when Muslim League’s struggle for separate Muslim state was in operation (Mir, Maududiat Aur Majooda Siaasi Kashmakash 48). He questioned Maududi’s previous assumption that the idea of Pakistan was based on territorial and cultural nationalism, which would divide the Muslim community or Ummah, and Maududi argued that, in essence, its orientation was towards nation worship, not Islam (Toor 109). In this context, Maududi referred to Pakistan as the birth of a “Monster”, Napakistan (The Land of the Impure) and the “Langra Lola Pakistan” (Limbless/Handicapped Pakistan). Mir asked Maududi and Jamat that in your own interpretation if Pakistan was the result of a secular campaign of western-educated Muslim leadership, why did Jamat use every forum to popularize the theocratic model of the state as “a radically revisionist idea” (Toor 106). The debates started between Maududi and Safder Mir over the conflict of Pakistani nationalism and its co-relation with Islam shows that the idea of Pakistan was debated not only in the inner circles of the corridor of power through parliamentary debates during constitutional development, but also equally in popular newspapers and literary circles of Rightist and Leftist.

The complexity of the state-religion relationship and the prevailing tendency of the Muslim League, along with rightist wing forces wanting national integration based on religion made the Leftist intellectuals realize that the only way to counter the Rightist wing definition of nationalism was a “Progressive National Project”. They understood that they must draw its inspiration from cultures and histories of different regions of Pakistan which might provide an alternative narrative in framing the identity of the new Muslim state (Toor 110). In order to meet this challenge, the most forceful voice in the 1950s and 1960s was Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the poet, writer, editor-in-chief of PPL, winner of the Lenin Peace Prize, and most prominent public intellectual of his time (Toor 110). In explaining the construction of Progressive Pakistan Nationalism, the writings of Faiz Ahmed Faiz on cultural aspects of national identity and integration contested the narrow views of nationalism that Right-wing writers advanced.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz strongly contested the argument of rightists that Pakistan's culture was simply "Islamic Culture". According to him, the Pakistani culture is diverse and multi-dimensional, having strong historical connections with the rich Indus valley civilization (Mohnjedero and Harrapa), including the influence of Central Asia, Iran, Turks, Afghans and British and its indigenous aspects of various linguistic regions and identities such as Punjab, Pashtoon Belt, Sind and Baluchistan. In explaining culture, Faiz highlighted the pluralistic aspects associated with the Pakistani culture, its historical sites, and cultural traditions of Indo-Muslim civilization, such as "Miniature Paintings", "Hindustani Classical Music", collective architecture and folk traditions of various regions of new Muslim "State Pakistan". The left proposed the debate on culture and territorial markers of the Pakistani nationalism as an alternative way to settle the dispute of national identity.

Another area of the battle of ideas that started between Rightists and Leftists in the early 1950s and 1960s was the discourse of loyalty. Muhammad Hasan Askari and Muhammad Din Taseer were on the front line of writers who questioned the loyalty of the progressives, mainly left-wing writers, to the state. Adeb Aur Riyaasat Say Vafaadari Ka Masla: Taraqi Pasandon Pe Kari Tanqeed (writers and the issue of loyalty to the state: A strong criticism of the progressives). Hasan Askari articulated a different position in the realm of ideological debates on the issue of nation-building and nationalist imagination in post-colonial Pakistan. On responding to the first conference of progressive writers and journalists in Pakistan (1948) (Majeed 65) in which a resolution in favor of democratic rights within Pakistan was passed, Askari argued that these communist intellectuals had no sympathies and loyalty to the new Muslim state and hence he labeled them "Fifth Columnists" (Majeed 67). Further, he declared their role and activities as subversive to the formulation of a Muslim nation. Askari's applied the discourse of "Muslim Nation" as a synonym for Pakistan and asked progressives to give a certificate of their loyalty to the nation and state in these words, "You need to convince us that you are, in fact, one of us and that your life and death are connected to the nation" (Toor 65). In the article "Fasadat aur Hamara Adab", he pointed out how the writers in Russia were restricted by the communist party for national interest and strengthened the foundation of the state. Pakistan also needed the same kind of expectations from writers to construct our state and nation, and he questioned the loyalty of progressive writers that they were not meeting the expectations of the Muslim masses (Askari 132).

The almost same line of arguments was adopted by another literary critic Muhammad Din Tasheer. He forcefully maligned progressive writers in the following way: the literary organization of communists had sole agenda, “to destroy the unity of Pakistan”. He framed criteria of loyalty around following questions: “are you proud to be Pakistan?” “What kind of democratic constitution do you prefer for Pakistan?” “What should Pakistan’s policy be with regard to Kashmir (Askari 66). These arguments summarize the nature of the tussle between rightist literati and leftist intellectuals in which a new discourse, loyalty to the state, became paramount for writers demanded by Askari and M. D. Taseer. They even provoked the government to take strict measures against leftist-influenced writers, their publications, public strikes, conferences, and seminars to minimize their public scope. (Askari 66)

The leftist intellectuals and literati were not silent on this front. They were equally involved and keen to read what was being written in the various literary journals and newspapers to respond to those questions. Zaheer Kashmiri wrote in *Sawera* (Kashmiri). If Askari refers to loyalty to Pakistan in terms of land or geography, he is simply recalling the Arab days of ignorance (*Ahd-e-Jahaila*) when they were proud of their land and considered it superior to others. If Askari associates loyalty to the government of Pakistan and the ruling establishment of Pakistan --- then suppose if it involves fascist activities and suppression against its own citizens and sabotages the civil and democratic rights, then definitely we would be on the opposite side of the fence, If Askari means loyalty to the peoples of Pakistan then our commitment and loyalty stands beyond any skepticism (Kashmiri 47). Sahir Ludhianvi argued in an article for *Naqush* in which he engaged the same debate of writers’ loyalty to the state or its citizens. Sahir Ludhianvi pointed out that those with dissenting opinions on government’s different policies or actions must not be charged as traitors; the state is too strong an entity to be harmed by a few individuals’ protests (Ludhianvi 12). Sahir responded that why should only the enlightened forces in Pakistan be marked as traitors? He argued that our crime was not more than that we fight for the rights of downtrodden classes of the society; we neither want to see Pakistan as a puppet of an imperial power such as the USA, nor do we want to see the monopoly of wealthy capitalist classes such as businessmen, factory owners and bankers over marginalized poor masses of Pakistan (Ludhianvi 12-13).

Zaheer Babar, another important literary critic of the left, argued more meaningfully that a separate Muslim state “Pakistan” was demanded for the cultural development and social welfare of the marginalized masses. However,



unfortunately, the real stakeholders of the state “The Masses” are still awaiting the fruits of their freedom. It should be asked what has changed in the life of commoners, the poor and the working classes of the state. The writings of the progressive forces are embedded with the ethos of these sections of the society because Pakistan loses its objectives and meaning if it dissociated from these seven crore people. All these progressive voices were a counter-response to the discourse of loyalty associated with Pakistan and Islam. These arguments within a discourse of patriotism are also reflected in the use of vocabulary. “The right-wing nationalist used the term Qaum (Nation) whereas the left-wing writes speak in term of Awam (The People)” (Toor 69).

The leftists in Pakistan have also resisted the ideological onslaught of the religious parties and responded to the alternative discourse of nationhood through literature, public gatherings, public parlors, and, more elegantly in poetry. Poetry of the leftists served as an effective tool to express resistance and resilience in the dominated political and social structures of the state. The poetic discourse played an essential role in overall consciousness against suppression. It attracted and received tremendous support in public arenas. The themes of resistance in the poetry of leftists reflected that they wanted to see the common people in the front seat as they considered people as the real guardians and argued that the “State does not exist in an abstract form,” contradictory to their opponents who were more concerned with patriotism and role of religion in the national imagination.

“Yah Dagh Dagh Ujala Yah Shub Guzeeda Saher”

This stain covered daybreak that night bitten dawn

“Woo Intizar Thaa Jis Kaa Yah Woo Saher Tho Nahee”

This was not that dawn of which there was hope

“Yah Woo Saher Tho Nahee Jis Ki Arzoo Lay Kur”

This not that dawn with longing for which

“Chaley Theey Yar Key Mil Jay Gii Kahaeen Na Kahaeen”

The friends set out that somewhere there would be met with (Agha Nasir 25-26)

Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem Subh-e-Aazaadi (The dawn of freedom) was perhaps the best reflection of feelings of disillusionment and irreparable loss of humanity

on both sides of the border during the bloody partition. Ludh Meelaone, the distinguished expert on Faiz and writer of the book “Pervarish-e-loh-o-Qalum,” argued that the abovementioned poem of Faiz influenced the mind of an entire generation (Vesleva 158). Faiz had faced criticism from his opponents that the progressives were unhappy and unwilling to accept Pakistan as an independent state and were working to undo the partition. Faiz, along with his leftist fellow, was maligned as disloyal without realizing the last part of a poem which encouraged struggle and march forward:

“Chaley Chalau Key Woo Manzel Abii Nahi Ayi” (Vesleva 158)

Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet

The poem of Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi “Tulu” (Dawn) was published in the same context:

“Muheen Raat Ka AaGhaaz Kitna Rangeen Tha

Muheeb Raat Ka Anjaam Jaane Kya Ho Ga”

The beginning of this abominable night was so beautiful who knows how it will end? (Toor 71)

Ahmad Riaz’s Poem “Adab ki Jaageerr” (Literary Inheritance):

“Subh-e-Azzadi-i-Nau Phoot Chuki Hai Lakin

Maazi-o-Hall Ki Ragoon mein Andhera Hay Vohi”

The dawn of the new liberation has broken

But there is still the same darkness in the paths of the past and the present (Toor 72).

The abovementioned poetic extracts of a few progressive writers became the subject of controversy between the already heated clusters of thinking: the rightist group of writers, mainly led by Askari, Taseer, Mumtaz Shareen, and progressive writers primarily represented the left in Pakistan. The central line of disagreement between the two wings was their different perspectives and approaches to explaining the trauma of partition, which in fact, occurred through

violence. The left perceived it not from an ideological but from a humanist perspective.

Habib Jalib (1928 – 1993), after Nazir Akbar Abadi, was the most important poet who made ordinary people and their issues a central theme of his poetry. Jalib, known as “Awami Shaer” (Public Poet), was the forceful voice of democratic ideas, humanism and enlightened concept of the welfare state and society. He remained intact with left-wing political activism, joint member of leftist parties such as Azad Pakistan Party, Sind Hari Tehrik, National Awami Party, The National Democratic Party, and Awami National Party. Jalib proudly recognized himself as a representative of the “People’s Court”, among the vanguard of leftist leaders, who remained a symbol of resistance and gathering public activism through his poetry and political ideas. In order to counter political Islamists and their slogan that Islam is in danger, Jalib’s Poem such as “Khatray Maen Islam Nahin”, Pakistan Ka Matlab Kya, “Ulema-e-Sau Kay Nam”, Maulana and Fatwa” were a clear reflection of the leftist poetry serving as an effective tool to express resistance in public arenas:

“Pakistan Ka Matlab Kia”

What does means Pakistan?

Bread, Clothes and Medicine

A little house to live in

Right to get the free education

I am also an equally staunch Muslim

What does Pakistan Mean?

There is no God but God (Jalib 175)

The highlighted extracts of the poem mentioned above were “critique of the simple ideological meaning of the idea of Pakistan without considering the basic dreams which were attached with this new Muslim state Pakistan such as bread, cloth, medicine and shelter (basic human needs of all citizens) and right of education. His famous Poem “14<sup>th</sup> August” was the continuity of the ideas which were attached to Jalib’s idea of Pakistan:

“Kahaan Tooti Hay Zangeerayn Hamari” (Jalib 210)

Yet we are everywhere in chains

## **Conclusion**

This article explored the role of leftist ideas in the emergence of Pakistan. It argued that the emergence and continuation of Pakistan as a non-theocratic state owes much to the appreciation of these leftist ideas in public arenas. Intellectuals on the left spotlighted and emphasized crucial debates surrounding the democratic state, provincial autonomy, minority rights, and socio-economic justice, among others. The analysis above established how these discussions influenced Pakistan's political and social development between 1947 and 1977. Even though these left-wing parties had limited electoral support, their mobilization capacity had a visible presence in shaping the identity of the new Muslim state. Using various primary sources, I propose that in Punjab, from a social history perspective, the state was not the only entity defining the idea of Pakistan and the public arenas was also influential in constructing the idea of Pakistan. The left contested the idea of an Islamic state, had internal debates on the relationship between Islam and socialism, struggled for the civil and democratic rights of the people, and expressed concerns regarding over-centralization.

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