

Exploring Syed Sher Ali Bacha's Impact on Politics and Progressive Literature as Marxist Leader, Writer, and Poet in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

Syed Sher Ali Bacha (1935-98) is one of the Pakhtun Marxist politicians who played a leading role in the leftist politics in the then NWFP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). He is known for his scholastic approach toward solution of Pakhtun problems because he drew insights from the Marxist philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism while approaching social, economic, and political issues of Pakhtun. He had resurrected the tradition of study circles in Pakhtun society. He was also the founding member and first General Secretary of two leftist political parties; Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP) and Pakhtunkhwa Mili Awami Party (PMAP). Thus, his entire political career spanning over a four-decades, was devoted to left wing politics and peasant movements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is explicit in his long struggle in leftist political parties like, National Awami Party (NAP), MKP, and in later part in PMAP. This research paper focuses on his writings on class difference and social inequality, as well as on his vision of creating unity among Pakhtun belt. The Communist Party of India (CPI), which was the first leftist political party of undivided India and was established in Soviet Tashkent in 1920s by émigré revolutionaries, had also notable figure like Muhammad Shafiq (Secretary of CPI), and other émigré Muhajirin from the then NWFP.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian, Peasant, Progressive, leftist ideology, Marxist-Leninist.

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INTRODUCTION

Syed Sher Ali Bacha was born on January 01, 1935, in a well-known *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Red shirts) family of Hoti Mardan. His father, Syed Akbar Shah Bacha was not only prominent in the ranks of *Khudai Khidmatgar* Movement, but his paternal uncle Syed Abdul Hanan Bacha was also president of the Hoti Mardan wing of *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Bacha, 2017). The association of his family with this progressive movement had an overwhelming impact on the thinking and political upbringing of his entire family members, particularly on the young generation. Progressive literature like *Pakhtun Resala*, and other revolutionary publications were the constant source of information for all family members which shaped his world view from childhood. Her mother was his teacher and would use to narrate stories of revolutionary figures of Indian liberation movement at the bedtime (Hunarmal, 2015). Young Bacha inhibited anti-colonial thoughts during his childhood and developed anti-imperialist feelings of opposing capitalism (Bacha, 1995).

Bacha was the most beautiful child of his village and therefore family members used to call him *Koko* (word used in Pashto to describe a cute and sweet child) while elders of the village called him Lali Bacha. He was raised and grew in Mardan and received religious education at his hometown. In 1944-45 he passed his primary school (5th Grade) from Government High School No 1, Mardan and done his Matriculation from Government school at Mardan in 1950 from Board of Punjab University¹.

After matriculation, he got a job in the district management as clerk. During the job, he was associated with Progressive writers, and would take part in Poetry *Mushaira*. Soon he realized that his job was not fulfilling his mission and therefore was not satisfied with that job and thus desired to pursue further education. In 1956, he decided to resign from the job and got admission in Government College Mardan.

As he was a bright student at the College and very soon became powerful debater, and speaker. He was recognized as accomplished poet during his studies and consistently published his poems and poetry at College's magazine. At the same time, he also published short articles and stories in Urdu Magazine, *Shafaq*. After BA in

¹ Before establishment of university of Peshawar, higher secondary education was under Punjab University.

1960, he proceeded to Muslim Law college, Karachi, where he founded *Adal*, a leading leftist Magazine. During his studies, he wrote excessively for this Magazine and also shouldered the same as Editor in Chief. Apart from this, he used to write for college magazine regularly and was also made as editor of the college Magazine. He used Anwar Bacha as his pen-name in his various essays and articles. During stay at Karachi, he used to go to Russian libraries and learned Russian language of elementary level (Bacha, 1988).

It was perhaps at Karachi that Bacha made connections with progressive activists and literary figures. In those days, members and leaders of Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) were living underground to evade arrest, after CPP was banned in 1954 as a consequence of Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. Zafar Janan Khattak, the eldest son of Khushal Kakaji (who was the then Secretary of banned CPP), was shifted to Karachi during the same time where Comrade Ziarat Gul, and other communist leaders were working underground. According to Special Branch reports (Report, 1969) preserved in Archives & Library Department, Peshawar, these communists were trying to establish contacts with progressive students and organization. Bacha was already associated with progressive association and could have hidden connections with comrade Ziarat Gul or other communist leaders. In an open-ended interview with the grandson of Khushal Kakaji, Zafar Janan met Bacha several times at Karachi.

SHER ALI BACHA AND HIS LITERARY ACTIVITIES

After getting law degree from Muslim College, he returned to Mardan Hoti in 1962. In an interview with his younger brother Syed Murad Ali Shah Bacha, it was disclosed that upon his return Bacha had started law apprenticeship with a famous advocate, Amirzada Khan, at the session court of Mardan. However, after some time he realized that his profession had consumed a lot of his precious time and considered this job an obstacle that stopped him from taking part in political and literary activities.

Therefore, he quit this profession for political activities and resurrected the communist tradition of organizing study circles. He gave more time to creative writings on philosophy, especially Marxist thoughts with its application on Pakhtun region. Besides this, he took keen interests in public debates, and would love to attend as well as organize literary gatherings, like *Mushaira* (a traditional literary gathering for reading poems). He would invite nationalists and progressive poets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to these *Mushaira* and would take great interests in all its arrangements (Khalil, 2010). He himself was a poet and would read his poems in these *Mushaira*, the participants of which were listening to his progressive and philosophical poetry with great delight. It had also deep impact on other progressive poets and literary figures.

In his circle poets like, Amir Hamza Shinwari (1907-94), Khatir Ghaznavi (1910-76), Dost Mohammad Kamil (1915-81), Farigh Bukhari (1917-97), and Qalandar Mohmand (1930-94), Ajmal Khattak (1925-2010), Ayub Sabir, Qalandar Mohmand (1930-2003), Salim Raz, Master Sultan Khalaqyar (1942-2005), Syed-ul-Abrar Ghar (1948-77), and hundreds of other famous poets, would come together to interact their views and ideas on the contemporary social and political developments. The Olasi Adabi Jarga (OAJ), which was founded by Sanubar Hussain Kakaji (1897-1963) was resurrected by Bacha after his death. It was due to his efforts that proletarian poetry developed further to a new heights (Jamal, 2020).

Bacha revived OAJ from 'inactive status' to a functional organization by establishing its office in his own house and devoted his life and resources for its uplift. His love for the literary world of ideas and thoughts is reflected from the fact that a grand *Musha-e-ra* was organized on the eve of his own marriage ceremony.

Bacha was a prolific writer, incorporating into his work his vast study of the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism. He has written over ten books about philosophy, socialism, the MKP, the materialist philosophy of history, and other progressive themes. He also contributed to various progressive periodicals a number of articles and essays. Among his publications include *Falsafa Sa Ta Waye*, (What is Philosophy) *Da Kisanano Khpal Pardi*, (The Peasant's Insiders and Outsiders) *Mazdoor Kisan Zindabad*, (Long Live the Workers and Peasants), *Da Mazdoor Kisan Tareekh*, (The History of Mazdoor Kisan Party), *Neem Nowabadiyati Nizam*, (Quasi-Colonialism) *Bal Mashaluna*, (Lit Torches) and *Zwand aw Fiker* (Life and Thought) (Azghar, 1968).

Selected Progressive Poetry with Translation

Bacha produced very limited poetry as compared to his prose work (Ayaz, 2022). In addition, he devoted more time to practical politics and would write much about the minutes, and decisions of various party meetings. He would also arrange study circles and progressive debates and would share his notes with participants. Based on these notes and explanations on various political matters, however, a number of articles by him have been posthumously published by Mardan Adabi Tolana.

Although Bacha wrote poetry himself only rarely, he was instrumental in developing a proletarian style in Pashtu poetry by patronizing others and participating in the development of their aesthetics. The proletarian poets in his literary circles, like Khalakyar, Ghar, and Wazir Mohammad Majboor, have contributed a great deal. As a result of these collaborative interactions the poetry of the post-1970 scenario became more radical and ultra-

left as far as its themes, content and form are concerned, in a situation where peasant militancy had reached the point of violent expropriation and assassinations of landowners. For example, take this poem, *Paigham* (The Message), eventually published in his 1995 compilation *Milli Atal*:(Bacha, 1995)

بيبا به سم گزار په ستمگر کوؤ	لوئي خو جرگه په پيښور کوؤ
يوښکرشي لښکر په ستمگر کوؤ	دلته ابا سين هلته پشين نيسي
دغه شر محشر له يو اشر گورو	ټک به د ټوپک وي په اټک بانده
دا پر بکره به مونږ په اشغر کوؤ	ځي چي څو گل په مارگله پله
پام به د پالنه د دوتر کوؤ	پولي به معلومي کړو مونږ پل په پل
لک واري باور په خپل رهبر کوؤ	وتړني واخان چي د بولان سره
دا د راز خبره مختصر کوؤ	ته دي سر پرست چه قام پرست نه دي
يو وار به لاهور زيرو زيرو کوؤ	پاتي دي ارمان داد سوري افغان
بيبا باچا اختر به په باختر کوؤ	تير چي شي دا تور شبخون په خور پښتون

Trans.

Let's have several grand meetings (jirga)² at Peshawar;
 Before ferociously striking the oppressor;
 Here occupies Abaseen (K.P) and there Pasheen;
 Be united to have military war (*Lashkar*) on the oppressor.
 The bang of guns will be heard on Attock;
 Let's raise a tribal force to combat this imperial army.
 Let's proceed together with this force toward Margalla
 The uprisings at Hashtnagar will finally decide this
 We will locate the boundaries (geography) of Pakhtun land;
 And we will protect our land and people
 Connects Pakhtun geography from Wakhan to Bolan
 With sincere and full trust on our leader;
 Who is not a true leader if he is not a nationalist;
 In nutshell, this is an open secret.
 It is un-fulfilled desire of red revolution (communist) in Afghanistan;
 That we will be able to overthrow Lahore³
 When this bare onslaught on all Pakhtun comes to an end
 Then we will celebrate Eid (happiness) at Bakhtar

This is an example of more radical and ultra nationalist poetry which directly threatened national establishment of Pakistan. He was put in jail for a number of times on such radical activities and literary works. He has also contributed to *Milli Pason* (National Uprising) his famous poem. Excerpt from this poem is reproduced in the following pages;

“As darkness arrives on a winter's evening,
 Or a laborer returns home from a factory,
 Or a peasant arrives his hut from the fields of a landlord,
 Or a frustrated beggar returns empty-handed from a capitalist's place,
 Or an innocent prisoner arrives in a prison like a motionless body,
 O my heart! My beloved homeland has a similar tale,
 By God, it's not a tale to be heard.”(Hunarmal, 2015)

² A traditional tribal council (assembly) of elders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Afghanistan, which takes major decisions or resolve conflicts.

³ This couplet pointed toward the power of Lahore (Punjab) as reminiscence of western imperialism, which was the obvious target of communist revolution in Afghanistan in late 1970s. During the same period, peasant movement was at peak in Hashtnagar valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

POLITICAL CAREER: FROM NAP TO MKP

The thinking and political orientation of Bacha is explicitly explained in his work (prose and poetry) which actually gets motivation from ideology of Marxists-Leninism. Perhaps, it due his literary orientation, or his close family relationships with nationalists and leftist friends, that he joined National Awami Party (NAP) in 1963⁴. NAP was the only national and nationwide leftist party, having its roots in all provinces, ethnic groups, and classes of the society. Though, its manifesto was establishing socialist revolution through national democracy. However, presences of numerous landlords, Khans and other right leaning figures, in the ranks of NAP, contradict its notions of socialist revolution (Ullah, 2015). Apart from this, it has also a considerable representation of peasants and working class, lower and middle class, progressive thinkers.

Sher Ali Bacha became General secretary, of Mardan district and later on elected as provincial member of West Pakistan Council. That was the time, when Sher Ali Bacha, won his seat and elected as BD member to the system of Basic Democracy introduced by the then military ruler, General Mohammad Ayub Khan (Bacha, 1995). He was young, courageous, and confident politician among his fellow BD members and always supported the rights of peasants. In one of the meetings of BD members of East and West Pakistan, held in Peshawar, he raised and questioned President Ayub Khan, that your promise of agriculture reforms did not come true yet.

During his early years in NAP, Sher Ali Bacha came close to Peasants and workers who were associated with the party. He was a keen observer, and very carefully studied the issues faced by peasants (Khan, Qadir. Khan, 1978). These peasants and Kisan, were trained and organized by Sher Ali Bacha, felt the need of their own platform, and thus laid down the foundation of Kisan Committee, (KC) in 1963 which was a non-political organization, working inside NAP. Major Ishaq Mohammad was elected as convener of the Kisan Committee while Ziarat Gul Lala, Abdusatar Lala, Mohammad Afzal Bangash, and several other senior members were its founding members. Syed Sher Ali Bacha became a member of KC as well as convener of District Mardan *Kisan Committee*. With the passage of time, KC had become fully active and functional by organizing small village level meetings in villages of Hashtnagar, like Harichand, Mandani, Dhakki, Amir Abad and surrounding populations. A big poster titled “ *Kisan Sa Ghwari ?* Peasant wants what? Was circulated in the whole province by the provincial office of KC which has some immediate demands like, agricultural reforms, forceful eviction of peasants be stopped, division of production between sharecroppers and owners be revised on justified principles (Bacha, 1988).

The establishment of Kisan Committees (KC) on National, Provincial, District, Tehsil and Union Council level, with its re-organization led to a phenomenal increase of party membership. The organization of KC at all levels is manifested in the fact that its supporters were present in almost every corner of upper Pakhtunkhwa, parts of Punjab and Sind. For example, there were 60 various KCs in District Mardan and Charsadda only with its executives members were more than more than one thousand (Bacha, 1975). In short span of five years, the KCs were turned into an organized force with its offices in most of the districts and tehsil of upper Pakhtunkhwa.⁵

Alongside this historic success of KC, undercurrents of disagreement among its leadership in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh resulted into a serious disintegration. The disagreement between Chaudhry Rehmatullah Aslam and Major Ishaq Mohammad occurred on the organization of Conference in Multan which was held on July 02-03, 1967. Ishaq Mohammad, who was the convener of KC-Punjab Chapter at that time, was forced by supporters of Chaudhry Aslam to resign from his position (N. Ali, 2019). Thus, in retaliation, the supporters of Mohammad called Kisan Conference on July 14, 1967, at Lyallpur (Faisal Abad). From Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a number of peasant leaders participated including Bacha, Sattar Lala, and Mohammad Khan Kaka. Sattar Lala had presided over the conferences where majority of its member reposed trust on Mohammad to carry on his work as convener of KC.

This had resulted in a split in KC at Punjab, which consequently led to the division of two groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Further Convenor of KC-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Shaheen Shah Bacha, who had attended Multan Conference earlier as an observer was given a show cause notice to explain his position. While giving explanation, he informed the central leadership that it was necessary to participate in KC because to know about the situation of Punjab. However, he was removed from convenorship of KC because of not complying orders of the party on July 13, 1967 (N. G. Ali, 2020).

On one hand, *Kisan Committee* become victim of internal strife and rifts, on the other, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, head of NAP, extremely disturbed by these *Kisan* conferences and was contemplating to close the KC

⁴ National Awami Party (NAP) was the only secular and progressive leftist party of united Pakistan at that time, which was founded in 1957. For more details, see, (Amin, 2022)

⁵ For example, every committee, has seven to Nine cabinet designatory, 20-25 executive members and its general members. See for details, Sher Ali Bacha, *Da Kisan Khpal Pradi*, (Peshawar: MKP office Barq Press, 1971), p.34

and disassociate members of NAP from peasant politics⁶ This disintegration NAP with expulsion of KC, was already happened in other provincial Chapters of NAP especially in Punjab where NAP (Mazdoor Kisan) had been emerged. In Karachi-NAP (Mazdoor Kisan Party) was named after the split. Therefore, without hesitation, a meeting of an Executive Committee of NWFP-NAP was called in on March 03, 1967. At Mardan.

This meeting was held at the house of Amir Zada Khan, of Tehsil Mardan for the purpose of expelling KC from NAP, where Ajmal Khattak on the direction of party's chief, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, moved a resolution to the effect that a person who was a member of NAP, must choose to either remain a member of NAP or to be a member of KC, as one cannot, at a time, become member of both organizations. That meant pulling off curtains for KC inside NAP. In his speech, Wali Khan blamed KC for bringing immature radicalization and damaging the nationalist movement by too much focusing on class struggle. Bacha, along with his comrades, Afzal Bangash, Mohammad Khan Kaka, Ziarat Gul Lala and other prominent peasant leaders, tried to justify their stance and stay inside NAP. Mohammad Khan Kaka, district convenor of KC, while speaking at the meeting, answered all questions raised by Wali Khan with extremely nice manner by presenting arguments based on facts and figures (M. K. Kaka, 1968). He dismissed the resolution by saying that KC is not a political party by showing references from the constitution of both organizations (Ishaq, 1971). He gave his argument of the plea that if a members of Trade Union, or Labor Union, Bar Association, and Literary Society etc. can become members of NAP then what was wrong with members of KC to become member of NAP (Khan, 1968). He also lamented the earlier historic U-turn of Khudai Khidmatgar government on the rights of peasants of Ghala Dher Kisan Movement in 1930s, and appealed NAP leadership to not violate principles of NAP's constitution, by expelling KC. Kaka viewed expulsion of KC from NAP a disaster for the future of nationalist and class politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

However this long debate with many arguments for and against, came to an end, with one conclusion- the forceful eviction of KC from NAP and it was portrayed as parting of ways of nationalist politics and class politics of down to earth ruled classes. For all explanations and arguments members of Council wanted to present, were not given time. And in a haste, was assumed passed⁷. Disappointed by NAP, the disgruntled peasants leaders convened a session on May 01. 1968 to discuss the post expulsion scenario and future of KC and thus, they formed Pakhtunkhwa Mazdoor Kisan Party (PkMKP). (Ishaq, 1972).

Several years the PMKP launched Hashtnagar peasant movement in 1971 which had reached to its peak due to the extensive work of the KC over past five or six years (Ahmad, 2009). The nascent party worked for peasants and successfully opposed the evictions of peasants from their lands. This movement was expanded to Hari Chand to Dargai, Malakand protected areas, Swat-Buner, Dir and Kohistan as well as to Mardan, Swabi, Peshawar, Hazara, and southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ayaz, Mohammad, Islam, 2022)

The formation of Pakhtunkhwa Mili Awami Party

The Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP) faced internal strife in 1978 and consequently the party was split in two groups; one group was led by Muhammad Afzal Bangash and other faction by Syed Sher Ali. This split occurred because of the differences between Bacha and Bangash over the Hashtnagar peasant uprisings of 1970s. Abdul Sattar Lala, who was one of the leading characters in staging this uprising, was charged by the party on account of his militant skirmishes with security forces at Mandani. He was given a show cause notice by the party to explain his position. Except Bacha, the party leadership including Bangash was satisfied by the explanation of Sattar Lala. However, Bacha expelled him from MKP.

Thus, Bangash, Sattar Lala, Farid Ullah Khan, Qadir Khan, and several other notable leaders founded a separated faction of MKP, while Bacha, with the support of many peasant leaders of Hashtnagar, was leading his own faction. Numerous efforts for unity were made but did not produce the desired results. In a similar

⁶ It is pertinent to note that it was considered a poor decision as in later period these peasant's politics with Maoist program was used against NAP in the then Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who gained popularity by championing Islamic socialism. In an open-ended interview with Dr. Prof. Ghulam Qasim Marwat in 2017, the researcher gathered that perhaps it was his political strategy to appease the religious right as well as absorbing the splintered peasant's groups into his newly founded Pakistan People's Party (Ayaz, 2017).

⁷ It was dubbed as controversial and illegal resolution, to many attended the meeting, on account of two arguments; first, it was more like a ruling in nature than a plan resolution, in a house of selective members, convened for the purpose. Technically and legally, it was right, because it was moved by a member and was seconded by, so as to qualify as a valid resolution. But remained controversial on the ground, that it was not put to voting, despite the fact, that opposition members, have called for voting on the matter. Second, it was illegal in the sense, that, according to the constitution of NAP, Kisan Committee was non-political organization, and legally can become its members. See for details, Sher Ali Bacha, *Da Kisanano Khpal Pradi*, (Peshawar: Office Pakistan Mazdoor Kisan Party, 1975, pp15-21.

fashion, a communist Mazdoor Kisan Party (CMKP) was founded in 1988 for the purpose of merging all factions and divergent peasant leaders. However, Bacha did not join this party (Ahmed & Khan, 2022).

It was a long desire of Bacha to unite all Pakhtun under the banner of one progressive political party. He succeeded finally, as Mehmood Khan Achakzai, son of Abdul Samad Khan Achakzai (founding member of NAP) agreed to launch Pakhtunkhwa Mili Awami Party (PMAP) in March 1989. Bacha was elected as the founding General Secretary of PMAP while Achakzai was worked as the founding chairman. (Taj, 2011). The focus of this party was to work for the Pakhtun areas of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was one of the objectives of PMAP to create a separate province for all Pakhtun, living in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, on a recent merger of erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, Achakzai opposed the bill in National Assembly (Editor, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Looking into the political career and long struggle of Syed Sher Ali Bacha, it is concluded that he played an integral role in the awareness of peasants and working class. He was a well learned in the philosophy of Marxist-Leninism and contributed a lot to progressive literature. His contribution in the development of proletariat poetry and resistance in Pashtun literature is remarkable achievement. Although Kakaji Sanubar Hussain, Qalandar Mohmand, were the pioneers of revolutionary romanticism in Pashtu poetry, however, it was Bacha who further developed proletariat poetry with a new insight in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Syed ul Abrar Ghar's works like Sparghai (Ghar, 1973), Master Sultan Khalakyar's Khwarikah Chigha (Khalakyar, 1974), etc. can be considered outcomes of Bacha's efforts. He has written extensively on class differences and social inequality. He urges Pakhtun to create unity among their ranks from Chitral to Bolan. Bacha was a Prominent leftist Pakhtun nationalist leader, as this study recommend inclusion of his literary work and contribution in the national curriculum as well as in the school and college's syllabus. His entire political career, spanning over a four-decade, one way or the other, is associated with politics of poor people and for the down-trodden working class and it may be given a place in the national history of the country. He drew insights from Marxist philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism while approaching the social, economic, and political issues of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which may be taught at school and college levels for academic enrichment of curricula.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS:

It is declared that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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