Lal Khan

On Can Partition Be Undone

Lal Khan is a prominent Marxist activist from Pakistan. He is the editor of the Asian Marxist Review. His book ‘Crisis in the Indian Subcontinent - Partition... Can it be undone?’ is provocative not only because it questions the official narrations of the modern history of the Indian subcontinent by analyzing new facts with theoretical tools embedded in Marxism, but also because of its activist programmatic sharpness that backs the revolutionary transformatory politics in the region. It asserts that only a voluntary socialist federation of the subcontinental societies can guarantee peace and prosperity in the region. The following interview with Lal Khan by Paramita Ghosh brings some of the important issues dealt with in the book, along with Khan’s perspective on the political situation and transformation in the subcontinent. It was originally published in an abridged form in The Hindustan Times on October 21, 2007. The present version was first published in Radical Notes on October 24, 2007.

Q1. You have taken on the holy cows, the big boys of the Indian subcontinent - Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Sheikh Abdullah... Who according to you, did his people and the people’s movements most harm? Which, or whose actions, most influenced the way the class picture of the subcontinent looks today?

A. I don’t think that all these leaders can be evaluated on equal terms and their roles be subjected to the same degree of critical analysis. But the role played by the political representatives of the local elite was clear enough in the freedom struggle. Even the serious mouthpieces of British Imperialism conceded the clear class divide and conflicting interests in the movement of National Liberation in India. I quote from the editorial of the London Times of January 29, 1928. It said, “There is no real connection between those two unrests, the labour and congress opposition, but their very existence and co-existence explains and fully justifies the attention which Lord Irwin gave to labour problems”. I also want to assert that these politicians could only play this role because the leadership of the CPI in reality abided the struggle of independence by collaborating with the British under the instructions from Stalin’s Moscow where the bureaucracy was carrying out its foreign policy for the national interests of “Russia” rather than following the Marxist-Leninist path of proletarian internationalism.

I think all of these ‘leaders’ influenced the post-colonial politics in different ways and to different degrees. Again the reason has been the lack of a clear alternative for irreconcilable class struggle.

Q2. Your attitude to Gandhi is really interesting and it of course overturns the popular perception of him. On the one hand, there is his formidable reputation as the saviour of minorities, as he did at Noakhali in 1947. On the other hand, as your book shows, in 1922 when Hindu soldiers from the Garhwal Rifles refused to fire on an anti-imperialist demo by Muslims, Gandhi supported them. Is there a contradiction between the two?

A. The ideological foundations of Gandhi’s policies were confined within the parameters of semi-feudal, semi-capitalist social economic relations. Hence all his political actions flowed from this thought. All the confusion and divinity aside, the reality is that India won Independence through a compromise and 2.7 million innocent souls were lost in this bloodshed. Sixty years later, India and Pakistan are the bastions of most disgusting destitution and poverty in the world.

Q3. You seem to suggest that Gandhiji’s protection of Muslims was actually an extension of a kind of state support to one’s subjects.

A. The liberation movement would not have stopped at the ‘stage’ of national liberation and could have moved on to social and economic emancipation through a socialist revolution. It was cut across by the religious frenzy to restrain it within the clutches of capitalism and the system of continual imperialist exploitation.
Gandhi wanted a peaceful derailment of the class struggle, which is a utopia. He might have had an honest sentiment to protect the Muslims but once the forces of reaction and communal hatred were unleashed even Gandhi failed to restrain them.

Q4. Leon Trotsky believed that the Indian bourgeois could never lead a revolutionary struggle and went on to call Gandhi an artificial leader and false prophet. Would you say the same of Jinnah? You mention an oyster dinner at the Waldorf hotel in 1933 when he laughed at the idea of Pakistan calling it impractical.

A. All leaders were subjected to change through the dynamics of the movement and dictates of the vested interests of the class they represented. Jinnah was vulnerable to that too. This shows the evolution of Jinnah from Waldorf hotel in 1933 to Karachi assembly in 1947. There were innumerable zigzags in that journey. Although Trotsky didn’t analyze him individually but from the point of view of his theory of permanent revolution, Trotsky’s analysis of Jinnah would not have been any different from his analysis of Gandhi.

Q5. Would you attribute the shaky structure of democracy in Pakistan to the class biases of its founding father?

A. The shaky structure of democracy in Pakistan is mainly due to the belated and corrupt character of its nascent bourgeoisie. In sixty years the Pakistani ruling classes could not accomplish a single task of the democratic/bourgeois revolution and cannot do that in a thousand years. Parliamentary or bourgeois democracy was one of those fundamental tasks. I may add that even the Indian ruling class has not been able to complete any of these tasks.

Q6. Bhagat Singh was of course one of the most progressive and thinking radicals of the liberation movement. But what is it about him that the Left, the Right and the Centre rush to adopt him as their own?

A. Bhagat Singh was no doubt an icon of the struggle against British imperialism. He developed his political policies and ideology when he had a chance to read works of Lenin and Marx while in prison. He was still forging his political position when he was hanged. Hence when his position of “Inqilaab” is put forth, its ideological and theoretical foundations are relatively shallow and not entrenched in scientific Marxism. Hence it is easier for the left, the right and the centre to rush to adopt him as their own. Thus it is vital that unless the youth who are inspired by Bhagat Singh are developed into Marxist cadres, mere slogan mongering of ‘Revolution’ could lead them in any direction. They can even blunder into certain reactionary movements displaying a revolutionary rhetoric. It is the tragedy of cultural primitiveness that the role of the individual in political movements is exaggerated. Icons are mystified and even worshipped. This devastates the role of a collective leadership in a revolutionary struggle and undermines the importance of scientific theory and practice.

Q7. Pakistan has mostly been under military rule. It has had democratically elected governments only thrice in 60 years. What is the reason that Marxism has never been an option, not even as an experiment?

A. In 1968-69 there was a revolution in Pakistan. From Chittagong to Peshawar, there was only one slogan in the air - Revolution! Revolution! Socialist Revolution! Workers occupied factories, the peasants besieged the landed estates and the youth were on the streets, refusing to pay fares in trains and buses. The prevalent property relations were being challenged by the revolution. From November 6, 1968 to March 29, 1969 there were at least 7 occasions when the capitalist system and state could have been overthrown through a revolutionary insurrection. Unfortunately due to the lack of a Bolshevik party this historical opportunity was missed. The Pakistan Peoples Party was a product of this revolution, as its founding documents clearly stated: “The ultimate objective of the party’s policy is the attainment of a classless society which is only possible through Socialist Revolution in our times.”

Z. A. Bhutto recognized that the character of the (1968-69) movement was socialist and not national democratic. That is why he became a legend of the masses for three generations. But he had no organised Bolshevik party or a strategy to carry this revolution through to its victorious end.

The so-called democratic regimes in Pakistan were only inducted by the ruling state either to diffuse a rising revolutionary upsurge or as a preemptive measure to deviate and confine the raging movements against military dictatorships within capitalist structures. In any case the basic fault lines in Pakistan are not between democracy and militarism or extremism and moderation. The fundamental contradiction is of class interests and no stability can come without the resolution of this contradiction.

Q8. Please tell us about your introduction to the Left ideology. Who were your mentors, your peers? You were born ten years after Independence. In the 1970s you were a student leader resisting the despotic Zia regime. Was Marxism a natural progression of a politics of student activism?

A. The first time I got to study Marxism was in 1976 when I was incarcerated in Multan Central Jail after a clash with Islamic fundamentalists; we were tortured by the state. In the prison library there were some works of Marx and Lenin lying in a corner. They were left there by some communist prisoners during the 1940s. After I was ordered to be shot at sight by the Zia dictatorship on June 10 1980, I had to flee to exile in Amsterdam. In Europe I had the opportunity to meet and discuss with comrade Ted Grant, who was...
my friend, mentor and teacher. I think that after Trotsky's assassination, Ted single-handedly held high the red flag of revolutionary Marxism. His contribution in Marxist theory is enormous. For more than sixty years he resolutely worked to deepen and enhance perspectives and strategy to lay the foundations of a new and genuine Marxist international.

Q9. When did you become Lal Khan? Why did you choose this name?
A. Lal Khan was the name of a sergeant in the British Indian army. He was my uncle and had been a prisoner of the Bolsheviks in 1919 when 21 imperialist armies attacked the nascent Soviet state. As a child I used to listen to his stories about how the Bolsheviks had treated the Indian military prisoners. Sometimes in dearth of food supplies the Bolshevik captors used to remain hungry themselves but fed their Indian prisoners. I was so amused and impressed that when, in 1981, I had to choose a pen name under the vicious Zia dictatorship I opted for that name. It also means Red. As I have been writing under this name for more than 26 years it would be useless to change the name which is recognized by workers and youth and linked with an ideological tendency.

Q10. Under whose regime was/is it most difficult to conduct Left politics? How irresponsible were Zulfiqar Bhutto, Zia, Sharif, Benazir to people's movements?
A. There is no situation in a capitalist milieu that is easy and viable to build the forces of revolutionary Marxism. Similarly there can be no objective conditions so bad in which Bolshevik party cadres can't develop the art of expanding the organization and building revolutionary forces. However the wrath and indignation of the masses against the brutalities of the Zia dictatorship was helpful in gaining recruits. But when Benazir Bhutto came to power, the way she disillusioned the movement and dashed the hopes of the masses, the political apathy and a certain demoralization that had set in, made our work somewhat more difficult.

Q11. What will happen to Kashmir?
A. The ruling classes of India and Pakistan have used and abused the Kashmir issue for sixty years. Now they can neither have an all-out war nor sustain peace. Their systems don't allow them much room. The masses of Kashmir have been brutalised and subjected to misery by these subcontinental elites. The Americans want a continual sale of their weapons of mass destruction at the expense of the sweat, tears and blood of the subcontinental masses. Without the overthrow of these capitalist regimes, the Kashmir issue cannot be solved. Unless the subcontinent gets independence from imperialist slavery, how can Kashmir gain freedom? Nationalism and fundamentalism are on decline in Kashmir; the youth and workers are moving more onto the lines of class struggle. This has to be linked to the class movements in India and Pakistan. A voluntary socialist federation of the Indian subcontinent would be the only guarantee for a genuine freedom and emancipation of the Kashmiri oppressed.

Q12. In Pakistan, on the one hand, there is the military which somehow has, in a way, been an upholder of liberal will and democratic parties like the PPP that are corrupt and thoroughly discredited. On the other hand, there are the religious rightist forces. What will Pakistan choose now?
A. The liberals and fundamentalists are both entrenched in this decaying capitalist economy. Imperialism and religious obscurantism are two sides of the same coin. Whenever a revolutionary movement of the toiling masses has emerged, the so-called liberal, democratic and religious rightist forces have always and will always join hands to crush any challenge to this exploitative system. The perspective of a mass movement is rejected by mainstream intellectuals in Pakistan. There is always a doom and gloom scenario preached by these apologists of Capital in the media. But a social revolution is the only way-out for the salvation of the people. I am convinced that the working classes shall tread upon this path sooner rather than later. The events of 1968-69 are too glaring a tradition to ignore.

Q13. How supportive are the Indian left of leftist struggles in its neighbourhood in Pakistan? What do you think of its position on the nuclear deal, which many feel, is just an anti-American statement?
A. There cannot be two separate revolutions in India and Pakistan. Five thousand years of common history, culture and society is too strong to be cleaved by this partition. However the left forces can learn from the experiences of each other. Especially the ideological mistakes made to be rectified and lessons learnt from. Obviously the opposition to the nuclear deal is positive. But from a Marxist point of view it is not the most important of issues in the present situation. The way market economy is ravaging India and throwing the vast majority of population into the abyss of misery, poverty, disease and deprivation is horrendous. I think that after sixty years of the traumatic experiences the left should at least try to understand that the basic character of the Indian revolution is not national democratic but socialist. Unless they change course the Indian proletariat will force them onto a revolutionary path. The vote of the masses to left parties in the 2004 elections was for a revolutionary change rather than to maintain the existing order. Next time they will vote with their feet. If these leaders still cling on to the redundant theory of two stages they shall perish in the rising tide of a workers upsurge. A fresh revolutionary Marxian leadership shall emerge to make socialist victory a reality in the impending class war about to explode.