

*Pakistan's Gramsci: The Life and Legacy of Sibte Hasan (1916-1986)*

*Abstract:* Sibte Hasan was an organic intellectual before the age of the so-called mass and social media. He was one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers Association in colonial India, as well as the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), along with Sajjad Zaheer and Faiz Ahmad Faiz in postcolonial Pakistan. Like the famed Italian thinker and activist, Antonio Gramsci, Hasan endured repeated jail terms, first during his sojourn in the United States, and then in Pakistan in 1951-55, and again during the Ayub dictatorship. Both thinkers chose to write in their native languages, Italian for Gramsci and Urdu for Hasan. But unlike Gramsci, Hasan was lucky to escape continuous jail terms, as well as an overzealous prosecutor who had decided in Mussolini's Italy that Gramsci's intellect had to be stopped from functioning for twenty years. Hasan's intellect though, flourished after his release from prison. Both Gramsci and Hasan were also concerned with producing organic and original theories, using Marxist concepts to apply to their material realities rather than the other way round. Hasan was one of the prominent protagonists in the battle of ideas in post-independence Pakistan which has continued to shape the debate over issues of identity, progress, religion and secularism – intellectually and in the public imagination. Not being a 'specialist', 'expert' and a drifter towards power and authority, Sibte Hasan took on big, much-needed subjects in his many works: whether the history of socialism in *Musa say Marx Tak* (from Moses to Marx); the people's history of Pakistani culture and its popular movements in *Pakistan main Tehzeeb ka Irtiqā* (The Evolution of Culture in Pakistan); or the departed cultures of the ancient Orient in *Maazi kay Mazaar* (Tombs of the Past); and documenting *The Battle of Ideas in Pakistan* and *Inqalab-e-Iran* (The Iranian Revolution), all from within a firmly Marxist and

materialist perspective. Another unheralded achievement of Sibte Hassan was the progressive journalism in Pakistan he did along with Faiz Ahmad Faiz, in such leading progressive newspapers as *Imroze*, *Pakistan Times* and *Lail-o-Nahar*. Reading these interventions and editorials today, one can in fact compile a veritable people's and social history of the period in Pakistan ranging from the 1950s to the 1980s on topics of staggering variety that continue to speak to us today, beset as Pakistanis are by an existential struggle between modernity and backwardness, secularism and fundamentalism, democracy and dictatorship, authoritarianism and pluralism. 2016-2017 is still being celebrated as Sibte Hassan's birth centenary year, connecting him to a long line of distinguished south Asian predecessors like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Altaf Hussain Hali, Iqbal and Allama Niaz Fatehpuri, amidst a continuing crisis of Pakistani/South Asian state, society and culture. This paper is therefore a tribute to, and a remembrance of, one of Pakistan's most important thinkers, who prepared, mobilized and inspired a whole generation of activists and intellectuals during the long nights of military dictatorship and obscurantism in Pakistan through his roles in Pakistan's nascent communist movement and the PWA; for the almost single-handed propagation and popularity of Marxist thought at a difficult time for Pakistan; and resisting against dictators, religious orthodoxy and literary mandarins alike. It draws upon both my original translations of Sibte Hasan's prose into English, and memories of his life and times in Karachi.