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Our comrade

The Importance of Being Lal

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Yasrab Tanvir Gondal, popularly known as Lal Khan, was laid to rest on February 22 in his native village Bhaun, district Chakwal. Like his eventful life, his funeral also became a revolutionary event. He would have been amused his burial ceremony, had he been able to witness it.

Marked by a fusion of religious, cultural and revolutionary traditions, his funeral became a great source of surprise for the Bhaun residents. Hundreds of Marxist activists from around the country managed to arrive Bhaun where Lal Khan penned most of his books and articles.

Bhaun is an old village where some remnant of British Raj can still be spotted, notably an abandoned Railway Station. Lal Khan's ancestral *haveli*, almost 150 years old, remains in good condition since his sister Batool spends half her time here. If not, she is settled in Stockholm.

From Kalar Kehar, a road snake sits way to Bhaun through hilly patches. Indeed scenic. One could imagine why would Lal Khan escape to his village while authoring his works. However, on February 22, Bhaun was shrouded in grief.

Borne by his comrades, when his bier started moving to Janazgah (funeral place), it turned into a revolutionary march with red flags. Teary eyed mourners were chanting slogans. "Forward to Socialist Revolution" was the most chanted slogan.

Funeral prayer as led by the local Imam who prayed for the the local hero. Over a thousand were in attendance. After the prayers, red flags were unfurled yet again. Many were chanting in unison. "Lal Khan! We will complete your mission of a Socialist Pakistan"; "Asia is red".

As he was laid to rest, Awais Qarni, Lal Khan's most favoured youth activist read out a revolutionary message, a completely unaccustomed tradition at the graveyard.

Next, Jawad Ahmad, Lal Khan's close ally and friend, was joined by hundreds in the 'International'.

Anthem of the First and Second Marxist Internationals, 'The International' was written by a transport worker after the Paris Commune was crushed by the French government in 1871. Later it became anthem of the Soviet Union and the Third International (until it was dissolved in 1944).

I had not slept the night earlier and drove few hours to attend the funeral of a comrade I had known since 1980.

When we first met in Amsterdam as exiles, we immediately became friends and comrades. Along a handful more comrades, we decided to build new revolutionary traditions and a party.

The Struggle was our semi-open group during the black days of the Zia dictatorship.

Our first major project was the publication of *The Struggle*, a bilingual journal in Urdu and English. It was one of the

most successful exile publication.

We jointly organised demonstrations rallies, meetings and study circles during these years to organize diaspora across Europe.

Meantime, Lal Khan way more disciplined than myself, completed his medical studies at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam where we both had enrolled. I opted to leave my doctoral studies in mass communication in order to work full time for â€˜The Struggle' group.

Our successful protest action against the Zia dictatorship during the Champions Trophy Hockey tournament at Amstelveen, Netherlands, in 1982 where Pakistan was playing the finals, was broadcast live on PTV for few minutes on state-controlled Pakistan television. This annoyed the dictatorship and a plan was hatched to bring us back to Pakistan.

The plot was to implicate the members of Struggle in a fake highjacking case. Eighteen of us were arrested from different towns across Netherlands including Lal Khan in August 1982. It was a sensational case for a while in the Dutch media. We were accused of plotting to highjack a PIA jet at Schiphol airport.

In fact, Dutch police were fooled by false information provided by an agent of Pakistani dictator. In short, we were released. The Dutch government formally apologised to our group after we took the government to the court.

The eight years as exiles were full of action. Our aim was to lay down the basis of a new political current. Our ideological guide was Leon Trotsky. We keenly read Karl Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and translated some of their works.

We established a lively political office of The Struggle, right next to Amsterdam's famous Dam Square. The years were full of optimism.

We returned to Pakistan when martial law was lifted on 1st January 1986. Our main tactic to build Struggle group in Pakistan was "entryism" inside the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a short term entry in a mass party in order to recruit militants for a new current.

The tactic worked for a while but not for long. Lal Khan won an absolute majority at the National Committee of The Struggle during 1991 when some of us raised the demand to quit the PPP and build an open party of the working class. This led to the parting ways for some years.

Along with like-minded comrades, I became part of tendency that launched the Labour Party Pakistan while Lal Khan opted to work within the PPP and labour movement.

Lal Khan was a brilliant speaker and nobody could match his knowledge of Marxist history. He was like a political dictionary of Bolshevism, particularly Leon Trotsky. His charisma lied in his ability to motivate the youth.

He could speak hours, without any notes, to a spellbound audience. One of the main feature of building his organisation The Struggle was holding successful yearly congress at Aiwan Iqbal Lahore where delegates in hundreds would gather for two days to discuss Pakistan perspectives, a political document with organisational and political priorities for the months to come.

The Importance of Being Lal

Lal Khan was very generous person and would not hesitate to spend his inherited wealth on his political activities. He was also adept at raising funds from his wealthy friends.

The only son of a senior army officer, with three loving sisters, Lal Khan was a unique character in Pakistan political history. He introduced new strategies and tactics in building a semi-open Marxist group.

Through his entryist tactics, one of his lieutenants, Choudry Manzoor Ahmad was elected as MNA in 2002 on the PPP's platform. Manzoor lost the general elections in 2008 and also the trust of Lal Khan, parting ways till his death on 21st February 2020. However, Manzoor was one of the mourners at Lal Khan's funeral.

Another close ally of Lal Khan is MNA Ali Wazeer, proud to be known as Marxist MP in a parliament dominated by elite. He was at the funeral with red eyes.

During the last four years in particular, I and Lal Khan became more close than ever. Our discussions led to the formation of Lahore Left Front and also holding of memorable Mochi Gate public meeting where most of PTM leaders spoke. He was a regular speaker at Faiz Aman Mela. His last public appearance was at the historic Students Solidarity March held on 29th November 2019. He was not well but on my insistence, he came to speak to thousands of students.

During the last Struggle congress at Aiwan Iqbal Lahore in in 2019, he fell unconscious. A lung cancer was diagnosed at ANMOL hospital Lahore. I was regularly by his side during the painful chemotherapy sessions. 'I will fight till the end', was his famous quote during our hours long discussions on future strategies during his year-long fight against cancer.

Fondly, he would always address me as 'my chairman'. The 'chairman' lost one of his most trusted comrade on February 21. But not the hope for a Socialist Pakistan.

PS:

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