



The Republic of the Tea House: Poets, Editors, and the Institutions of Literary Resistance in Punjab, 1947–1977

Muhammad Shafi

Associate Professor, Department of History, Government Shalimar College, Lahore.

shafiisahib@gmail.com

Hussain Ahmad Khan

Professor of History, Director, Institute of Global and Historical Studies, Government College University, Lahore

hussainahmad@gcu.edu.pk

Abstract

The literary left of the Punjab survived three decades of bans, seizures, prosecutions, and patronage because it was not a doctrine but an infrastructure. This article reconstructs that infrastructure as an institutional system: the Progressive Writers' Association as its parliament, banned in 1954; the Halqa-e-Arbab-e-Zauq and the Pak Tea House of Lahore as its permanent floor; the little magazines, Savera, Adab-i-Latif, Naqoosh, and the mass-circulation Lail-o-Nihar, as its circulatory system, struck by the seizure of the Progressive Papers in 1959 and rebuilt in Funoon; the courtroom and the prison, where the trials of Manto and the jail volumes of Faiz converted suppression into amplification; and the Pakistan Writers' Guild of 1959, through which the state, having banned the association and seized the press, attempted to purchase the writers themselves. The state's counter-institutions concede the article's thesis: organization, not opinion, was the contested asset. Because the system was redundant, no single blow could silence it, and the literary left's most durable creation was not any text but the connected set of institutions that kept texts possible.

Keywords: Progressive Writers' Association; Halqa-e-Arbab-e-Zauq; Pak Tea House; Urdu periodicals; Manto; Faiz; Writers' Guild; literary institutions.

Introduction

On any working evening of the 1950s, the Pak Tea House on the Mall in Lahore held, at its separate tables, the entire institutional order of Punjabi letters. At one table sat the week's gathering of the Halqa-e-Arbab-e-Zauq, the Circle of the People of Taste, dissecting a freshly read poem; at another, the men of the Progressive Writers' Association argued the movement's line; between them circulated the editors of the little magazines collecting promises of contributions, and through the door, trailing admirers, might come Ustad Daman, the Punjabi people's poet of the walled city. The same faces would meet again that week at a magazine office, a mushaira, and, in the bad seasons, a courtroom or a jail visit. The scene is usually remembered as atmosphere. This article proposes to read it as structure: a connected system of institutions through which literature functioned, for thirty years, as organized resistance.

A firewall must be built into the design, because two adjacent studies already stand on this ground. What the literary left argued, its ideological battles with the religious right, the loyalty controversies, and the poetry of partition and dissent, has been documented in a published study; what it campaigned for, the civil and democratic rights of the citizen, is examined in a companion article, which also treats the politicized mushaira and the resistance poems as

instruments of that campaign.¹ This article therefore asks the third question, the one both leave open: how literary life was organized, through what associations, floors, periodicals, trials, prisons, and patronage systems the argument and the campaign were physically carried. Its thesis is that this infrastructure, not any doctrine, was the literary left's decisive creation, and that the state's own conduct, which attacked the institutions rather than the ideas, proves that the state agreed.

The sources for an institutional history are the institutions' own memory, and Lahore preserved it unusually well. The memoir literature is the spine: K. K. Aziz's affectionate reconstruction of the coffee-house world and Intizar Husain's chronicle of his literary generation, which together map the rooms, the rituals, and the personnel of the system; around the memoirs stand the files of the magazines themselves, the scholarly reconstructions of the progressive movement, its party relations, and its Cold War environment, and the biographical scholarship on the era's trials.² Memoirs flatter their tables, and the protocol is the series' standing one: corroboration across accounts, with the institutional facts, foundings, bans, seizures, and convictions, anchored where possible in the scholarship rather than the reminiscence. What follows moves through the system's five estates in turn: the association, the floor, the periodical, the courtroom and cell, and the state's counter-institution.

The Association: The Progressive Writers in Pakistan, 1947–54

The Progressive Writers' Association arrived in Pakistan as a going concern, and its continuity across partition was itself an institutional feat. Founded in the mid-1930s by Indian students in London and inaugurated at Lucknow in 1936 with Premchand in the chair, the Association had built, by 1947, a subcontinental network of branches, conferences, and affiliated journals; at partition the network divided with the country, and the Pakistani Association reconstituted itself with its Punjab branches, centered on Lahore, as its working heart.³ The inheritance mattered because it meant the literary left began the new state's life already organized, with membership rolls, meeting habits, and an international horizon, at a moment when almost nothing else in Pakistani civil society could say the same. The League had inherited a movement; the progressives had inherited an institution, and the difference would tell.

The Association then narrowed itself, and the narrowing was an institutional decision with institutional costs. In the conferences of 1948 and 1949, under the discipline of the newly consolidated Communist Party, the Pakistani Association adopted the hard line of the period, resolving literature into the class struggle, anathematizing the uncommitted, and reading out of the movement's fellowship the liberals, the formalists, and the merely independent.⁴ The purity purchased coherence and cost breadth: a tent that had once held nearly everyone who wrote now demanded a card, and the excluded did not stop writing, they simply wrote elsewhere, in the Halqa's neutral sittings and the big-tent magazines the next sections describe. For a study of infrastructure the lesson is exact. Doctrine concentrated the Association; the system as a whole survived because the concentration expelled talent into its other nodes rather than out of literature.

¹Muhammad Shafi and Tahir Kamran, "Leftist Literati, Activists: Debating the Idea of Pakistan in Public Arenas (1947–77)," *Journal of Research in Humanities* 58, no. 2 (2022): 122–35, documents what the literary left argued.

²K. K. Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore: A Memoir, 1942–57* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2008); Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka Dhuhan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1999).

³Carlo Coppola, *Urdu Poetry, 1935–1970: The Progressive Episode* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*; Kamran Asdar Ali, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan, 1947–1972* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Saadat Hasan Manto's estrangement is the narrowing's emblem, and it complicates every simple map of the period. The greatest Urdu prose writer of the age was not a man of the right; yet the hardened Association condemned him among the reactionaries, and Manto spent his last Lahore years, until his death in 1955, outside and often against the movement whose broad church he had once adorned.⁵ The case matters institutionally twice over. It shows the Association's discipline operating as a genuine expulsion mechanism, with reputational consequences its targets felt; and it establishes, for the courtroom section below, that the state's literary prosecutions cannot be read as a simple duel with the organized left, since the most prosecuted writer of the era stood outside the organization. The system this article maps was larger than its most famous association, which is part of the argument.

The conference was the Association's characteristic institutional form, and it functioned as the literary left's parliament. Delegates travelled, credentials were contested, sessions debated the movement's line, and resolutions issued, on literature, on language, and, famously, on the liberties of the citizen, in the manner of a legislature the country did not yet possess; the content of the civil-liberties resolutions, and the treason polemics they provoked, belong to the companion studies, but the form belongs here.⁶ A movement that conducts annual parliaments trains organizers, produces records, and creates offices worth holding, which is to say it reproduces itself; and the same form gave the state an address at which the movement could be struck. Both consequences followed, the second sooner.

The ban of 1954 closed the Association, and its logic is the article's thesis stated by the state. In the crackdown that outlawed the Communist Party in July 1954, the Progressive Writers' Association was proscribed alongside it, its meetings unlawful, its organizational life extinguished; writers as individuals remained free to write, and the distinction is the revealing part.⁷ A government that feared progressive opinions would have prosecuted books; this government banned an association, conceding in law what this article argues in history, that the threat was the organization, the network of conferences, branches, and rolls, not the sentiments of any page. The ban succeeded against its target and failed against the system: the Association's functions dispersed into the floor and the periodicals, which no ordinance had named, and the literary left entered its most productive decade with its parliament closed and its republic intact.

The Floor: Halqa, Tea House, and the Punjabi Voice

The Halqa-e-Arbab-e-Zauq was the Association's constitutional opposite, and the opposition was the system's good fortune. Founded in Lahore in 1939, the Circle bound itself to a single weekly ritual: a text was read aloud, and then criticized, without mercy and without regard to the author's eminence, by whoever sat in the room; the Circle adopted no politics, required no card, and elected its officers for the management of chairs rather than the management of minds.⁸ The format deserves recognition as a piece of institutional engineering. By constitutionalizing criticism and excluding commitment, the Halqa created the one literary space no regime needed to fear and no faction could capture, and therefore the one space that never closed. When the Association was banned in 1954, its members did not cease to meet; they walked, in effect, to the next table, where the Halqa's sitting continued as it had every week since before the state existed.

⁵Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁶Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*.

⁷Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*; Asdar Ali, *Surkh Salam*.

⁸Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka Dhuhan*; Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*.

The rivalry of the two bodies was real, and their symbiosis was more important than their rivalry. The polemics of the age, committed literature against art for art's sake, adab as struggle against adab as craft, ran precisely along the Association-Halqa seam, and the debates could be savage; yet the two organizations shared rooms, shared members, and shared, most consequentially, an audience, so that a writer expelled from one fellowship was received the same evening by the other.⁹ For the infrastructure thesis the seam is the point. A literary system with one association is as strong as that association's legality; a system with two, constituted on opposite principles, is as strong as the state's willingness to ban criticism itself, which no Pakistani government of the period possessed. The quarrel between the tables kept both tables occupied, and occupied tables were the resistance's minimum condition.

The Pak Tea House was the floor beneath both tables, and its institutional genius was to be only furniture. The café on the Mall, adjoining the old campus, hosted the Halqa's sittings, the progressives' arguments, the editors' recruitment, and thirty years of nightly conversation among men who agreed on nothing but the address; it had no membership to proscribe, no constitution to suspend, no press to seize, and no funds to attach, and so it survived every regime of the period untouched, the one assembly in Pakistan that martial law could not dissolve because it had never assembled anything but chairs.¹⁰ K. K. Aziz's memoir has preserved the coffee-house world's census, its proprietors, waiters, tables, and talkers, and the preservation is not nostalgia but archive: the Tea House was the literary left's parliament house after 1954, and the memoir is its Hansard.

Ustad Daman gave the floor its Punjabi voice, and his position in the system was unique and instructive. The people's poet of the walled city, composing and reciting in the language of the province's majority, Daman belonged to no association, edited no journal, and held no office; his institution was himself, his baithak in the old city, and the mushaira platform, from which his Punjabi satire on the powerful travelled by memory through publics the Urdu and English systems never reached.¹¹ Governments courted him across the period and none captured him, and his repeated troubles with authority certified the independence. Daman's case marks the system's linguistic boundary honestly: the republic of the Tea House conducted its business overwhelmingly in Urdu, and the Punjabi voice sat with it, celebrated and singular, rather than in it, an asymmetry between the literary system and its province that the conclusion must weigh. The floor, taken whole, was the system's redundancy layer, and redundancy is the section's finding. Association and Circle, café and baithak, the committed and the neutral, together constituted a standing capacity for literary assembly that no single legal instrument could reach: ban the Association and the Halqa sat; suspend formal meetings and the Tea House's tables were merely social; silence Urdu's print and Daman's Punjabi travelled by voice. None of this was designed, in the sense of planned by anyone; it accreted, out of rivalries and habits, into a fault-tolerant architecture that the period's history then tested blow by blow. The following sections record the blows; the floor's significance is that after every one of them, the same evening's conversation resumed at the same address.

The Trenches: Little Magazines and the Big Weekly

The periodical was the system's circulatory organ, and its economics explain both its courage and its fragility. The Urdu literary magazine of the period was characteristically a proprietor-editor's enterprise, financed by subscriptions, thin advertising, and the editor's own purse, produced on

⁹Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka Dhuhan*.

¹⁰Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore*.

¹¹Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore*; Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka Dhuhan*.

narrow margins with unpaid or barely paid contributors; the form's poverty was its independence, for a journal that lived on its readers owed nothing to the government's advertising departments, and its fragility, for a single ban, paper-quota refusal, or postal harassment could kill it.¹² The literary left's periodical strategy, never articulated but perfectly legible in retrospect, was portfolio diversification: committed quarterlies, big-tent monthlies, and one mass-circulation weekly under a newspaper house's protection, so that the argument always had more vehicles than the state had convenient instruments.

Savera and Adab-i-Latif held the committed end of the portfolio, and Lahore's little magazines were the movement's trenches. The two journals, with their fellows, published the progressive canon as it was written, the criticism that fought the era's polemics, and the young writers the Association's conferences had recruited; they endured the standing pressures of the trade, scrutiny, occasional proscription of numbers, and the constant precariousness of the form, and they were edited as acts of commitment rather than commerce.¹³ Their institutional function exceeded their circulation. A little magazine is a movement's memory and its credential: it fixes the line in print, gives the young a threshold to cross, and proves, issue by issue, that the movement exists. The state could and did strike individual numbers; it never found an instrument against the form itself, which required only an editor, a press, and a post office to resurrect.

Naqoosh was the system's big tent, and its editorial catholicity was a strategy with institutional consequences. Under Muhammad Tufail the Lahore monthly opened its pages across the period's quarrels, publishing progressives and their adversaries, devoting its celebrated special numbers to single writers and themes, and building, on that breadth, the largest serious literary readership in the country.¹⁴ For the left the tent mattered as neutral ground in print, the periodical counterpart of the Tea House's floor: a progressive whose own journals were struck could still reach the common readership through Naqoosh, and the magazine's prestige protected its contributors somewhat as the café's publicness protected its talkers. The system's health, this article has argued throughout, lay in its mixed constitution, committed and neutral institutions interlocking; Naqoosh was the neutrality that made the commitment sustainable.

Lail-o-Nihar was the portfolio's mass-circulation flagship, and it carried the culture war to the newsstand. The weekly of the Progressive Papers, with Sibte Hassan in the editor's chair, joined the resources of a major newspaper house to the program of the literary left, printing in tens of thousands what the little magazines printed in hundreds: the cultural criticism, the progressive verse, the contests over Pakistani identity that the companion studies document, delivered weekly to a readership no quarterly could imagine.¹⁵ Institutionally the weekly was the left's boldest wager and its most exposed position. Sheltered by the Progressive Papers, it enjoyed protections the proprietor-editors lacked, professional staff, secure paper, national distribution; and it inherited, by the same shelter, the newspaper house's vulnerability, for its fate was chained to its protector's, and the protector had been marked.

The pressure apparatus bore on the periodicals continuously, and its instruments deserve enumeration because they shaped editorial life daily. The tools Zamir Niazi catalogued for the newspaper press bore equally on the journals: security laws under which an editor answered personally for his pages, the press advice that specified silences, the discretionary allocation of newsprint in a paper-short economy, postal registration that could be withdrawn, and the

¹²Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*.

¹³Savera (Lahore) and *Adab-i-Latif* (Lahore), files.

¹⁴*Naqoosh* (Lahore), files.

¹⁵Saadia Toor, *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); *Lail-o-Nihar* (Lahore), files.

withholding of the government advertising that kept marginal publications alive.¹⁶ Under such a regime every issue of a committed journal was a calculated risk taken by a named individual, which changes the historian's reading of the files: the timidities were rational, the boldnesses were purchased, and the mere continuity of publication, season after season, was itself the resistance's quiet form. The editors of this period belong in its history of courage beside the poets, and institutional history is where they receive their due.

The seizure of 1959 struck the portfolio's flagship, and the system responded as an infrastructure responds. When the Ayub regime took the Progressive Papers, Lail-o-Nihar passed with the newspapers into official hands, its progressive identity extinguished at a stroke, the largest single blow the literary left's print system ever absorbed.¹⁷ What followed is the article's thesis in action. The load shifted: the little magazines carried the canon, Naqoosh's tent widened, the Halqa and the Tea House absorbed the displaced editorial energy, and within four years the system had built itself a new flagship, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi's Funoon, founded in 1963, which gathered the progressive mainstream and the rising generation and carried both to the period's end.¹⁸ The state had amputated the system's largest organ and the system had regenerated it, under a different name, beyond the reach of the original instrument. No episode better demonstrates why doctrine-hunting histories of the left mistake their object: the doctrine was continuous, but the survival was institutional.

The Courtroom and the Cell: Literature on Trial

The state built two institutions of its own into the literary system, the courtroom and the prison, and both worked against their builders. Neither was designed for literature; both were annexed to it by use, the courtroom through the obscenity and security prosecutions of writers, the prison through the detentions that gave the era's poetry its most famous addresses. The sections above have shown the state striking the left's institutions; this one shows the state's institutions being captured, functionally, by the literature they were meant to discipline, and the capture is among the period's strangest and most consequential institutional facts.

Manto's Lahore trials made the courtroom a literary venue, and their lesson exceeded their verdicts. Prosecuted repeatedly for obscenity over "Thanda Gosht" and its companion stories, tried before Lahore magistrates, convicted, fined, and appealed, Manto stood in the dock in the same years his estrangement from the Association was complete, so that the state's most sustained literary prosecution targeted a writer the organized left had itself cast out.¹⁹ The trials assembled, under subpoena, what no mushaira could: writers testifying as experts, editors as witnesses, the press reporting argument about the nature of literature from a government courtroom. Ayesha Jalal's reconstruction has fixed the episode in scholarship; its place in this article is institutional. The obscenity trial gave literature a state-funded public platform with the state cast as antagonist, and every prosecution restaged the play.

The trials' systemic effect was amplification, and the state never solved the paradox. A story tried is a story advertised; a fined author is a certified truth-teller; a courtroom exchange on the boundaries of literature is criticism conducted at the state's expense and reported at the newspapers'; and the writers' world, whatever its internal quarrels with the defendant, closed ranks in the dock's presence, for every faction understood that the precedent would not check party cards.²⁰ The prosecutions thus functioned, institutionally, as the system's involuntary

¹⁶Zamir Niazi, *The Press in Chains* (Karachi: Karachi Press Club, 1986).

¹⁷Niazi, *The Press in Chains*; Toor, *State of Islam*.

¹⁸*Funoon* (Lahore), files.

¹⁹Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*.

²⁰Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*.

publicity organ and its solidarity machine at once. This is not to romanticize: the fines were real, the anxiety corrosive, and Manto's early death closed the era's greatest career in poverty. It is to record that suppression through law, in a society with a functioning literary system, purchased the opposite of silence, and the state's own files taught it nothing.

Faiz's imprisonment made the cell a publishing house, and the volumes it produced were institutional events. Detained in the Rawalpindi case in 1951 and held through the trial years, Faiz composed in prison the poems gathered in *Dast-e-Saba*, published in 1952 while its author stood accused of conspiracy, and continued in *Zindan Nama*, the prison book itself; the collections were received, celebrated, and memorized as they appeared, the jailed poet's voice arriving in the arena with the added authority of its address.²¹ The companion studies read the poems; this article reads the mechanism. The state had converted its most eloquent opponent into a national institution by the act of confining him: the prison certified the poet's seriousness, the censor could not reach verse already committed to memory, and publication from the cell demonstrated, to every writer watching, that the system's circulation survived even the state's innermost custody. Imprisonment, spent well, purchased reputation, and the literary left learned to spend it.

The State Buys a Pen: The Writers' Guild

In 1959 the state changed instruments, and the change conceded every argument this article has made. Within months of seizing the Progressive Papers, the Ayub regime sponsored the founding of the Pakistan Writers' Guild at Karachi, with the bureaucrat Qudratullah Shahab as its architect and patron: a national organization of writers, blessed and funded from above, offering what no proscription could, prizes, stipends, publication subsidies, housing plots, foreign delegations, and official standing.²² The sequence tells the strategy. The state had banned the writers' association in 1954 and seized their press in 1959, and the literary system had absorbed both blows; the remaining target was the writer's livelihood itself, and the Guild aimed at it, not with a ban but with a salary. Co-optation is the tribute coercion pays to a system it cannot break, and the Guild was the largest such tribute of the period.

The Guild's offer met the writer's poverty, and the response cannot be told as a morality play. Urdu letters paid almost nothing; the proprietor-editors ran at loss, the poets held day jobs or none, and the state now tendered, to men who had spent a decade under bans and press advice, the first institutional security their profession had ever seen. Many joined, progressives among them; some abstained, at real cost; most managed the membership as writers manage patrons, taking the stipend and guarding the sentence.²³ Survival is not betrayal, and the period's memoirs are rightly gentle with the joiners. The institutional judgment is separate from the moral one: whatever each writer intended, the Guild's existence gave the state a lever inside the literary system, a roll of beneficiaries, a schedule of favors, and an annual occasion for gratitude, and levers, once installed, wait for hands.

The Guild's ambiguity was embodied in its architect, and the period's ironies converge on Shahab. The secretary who assembled the writers' official body for a military regime was himself a literary man, honored by the profession he organized, and, as another study in this series records, the author of the era's most famous mystical memoir. For the infrastructure thesis the Guild's deepest significance is admmissive. A regime that believed ideas were the threat would have founded a censorship board; this one founded a writers' welfare organization, betting that

²¹Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*; Toor, *State of Islam*.

²²Qudratullah Shahab, *Shahab Nama* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, n.d.); Toor, *State of Islam*.

²³Toor, *State of Islam*.

institutions, fed, grow tame. The bet was not absurd, and its partial success, the quieter sixties of official letters, must be entered in the ledger beside the system's survivals.

Endurance and Absorption, 1965–77

The system's last decade ran on the architecture the earlier blows had tested, and its resilience was now practiced rather than improvised. The mushaira circuit carried the era's political verse to its mass audiences, a story the companion study tells; Funoon consolidated as the progressive mainstream's journal of record; the Halqa's sittings and the Tea House's tables ran unbroken through the 1965 war, the 1968–69 upheaval, and the trauma of 1971, the floor absorbing each shock as it had absorbed the bans.²⁴ The remarkable fact of these years is negative: nothing closed. A system that had lost its association, its flagship weekly, and years of its greatest poet's liberty entered the 1970s with every functional estate intact, which is the strongest single evidence for the redundancy this article has argued.

The People's Party era completed the state's repertoire with absorption on the grand scale, and the literary system met it as it had met the Guild. The government that had campaigned in the left's vocabulary drew literary men into official culture, culminating in the founding of the Pakistan Academy of Letters in 1976, a national institution of letters under state patronage; simultaneously, as the companion study records, it broke the labor movement whose cause the same literature had sung.²⁵ The writers managed the contradiction as the period had trained them to, taking the platforms and keeping the sentences, and when the coup of July 1977 closed the era, the system stood where this article's tour began: the tables occupied, the journals publishing, the floor intact, and the infrastructure of resistance in place for the harder decade it did not yet know was coming. That sequel lies beyond this study; the capacity it inherited does not.

The Ledger: Why Infrastructure Beat Doctrine

The period's score can now be totaled, and it reads as a paradox until the institutional accounting is applied. Every doctrinal formation of the literary left was broken in its turn: the party banned in 1954, the Association with it, the press seized in 1959, the writers courted onto the state's payroll thereafter, the movement's political hopes absorbed and betrayed by 1972. Yet literary resistance never lapsed for a season across thirty years, because the system was redundant by construction: strike the association and the magazine carries the load; seize the magazine and the floor carries it; jail the poet and the jail amplifies him; buy the writer and the sentence, notoriously, stays unbought. The state fought a network with instruments made for organizations, and the network's history is the record of the mismatch.

The rival infrastructures of the period frame the achievement and check any triumphalism. The religious right built its own print apparatus and commanded, in the shrine world, an arena older and larger than anything the Tea House held, as this series' companion studies show, and the comparison yields the honest measure: the literary left's system was the best organized per member and the smallest per public of the period's three great arenas, an elite infrastructure whose mass reach depended on the fragile relays of the seized press and the spoken poem. And one exclusion must be named without softening: the republic of the tea house seated almost no women. Its tables, sittings, and mastheads were male to a degree its memoirists barely thought to record, and the system that argued the awam's rights reproduced, in its own rooms, the exclusions of the society it criticized. The infrastructure's history is incomplete until the history of who could not enter it is written.

²⁴The politicized mushaira circuit of the Ayub years is examined in the companion article on the left's struggle for civil and democratic rights.

²⁵Shafi and Kamran, "Leftist Literati."

Conclusion

The literary left's masterpiece was not a text but the system that kept texts possible, and the claim can now be stated as history rather than epigram. Between 1947 and 1977 the writers of the Punjab built and defended a connected order of institutions, association and circle, café and courtroom, quarterly and weekly, cell and guild-managed salary, through which argument survived every instrument a determined state deployed against it; the order's parts were humble, chairs, mastheads, weekly rituals, subscription lists, and their sum was the freest continuous space in the country's first three decades. Institutions, this series has argued, are where arenas live between their events; the republic of the tea house was the literary arena's living quarters, and its unbroken tenancy is the period's quietest political achievement.

The historian's last debt is to the keepers rather than the famous. The period's memory belongs, deservedly, to its poets; its survival belonged to its secretaries and proprietors, the conveners who booked the rooms, the editors who signed the risky pages and paid the fines, the proprietors who ran the losses, the waiters who let the tables sit. They built nothing that fits an anthology, and everything the anthologies required. If the constitutions of Pakistan are the minutes of its public arenas, as this series contends, then the literary arena's minutes were kept at a café table on the Mall, in magazine colophons and conference registers, by men whose names the indexes barely hold, and the recovery of their institution-building from beneath the glamour of the texts is what an institutional history is for. The republic they kept open has outlived them; this article is a receipt.

Note: This article is extracted from Muhammad Shafi, "Debating the Idea of Pakistan in Public Arenas: A Case Study of the Punjab (1947–1977)" (PhD diss., Department of History, Institute of Global and Historical Studies, Government College University, Lahore), completed under the supervision of Hussain Ahmad Khan.