

Rediscovering Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban: Communist Politics, Labour Activism, and Anti-Colonial Resistance in British India and Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban, born in Lahore in 1902, belonged to the first generation of communists from the subcontinent. During Tehrik-e-Hijrat, he crossed into Afghanistan and later trained in Tashkent and Moscow, where he completed an MA in Sociology at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV). After returning to India, he stood trial in the fifth and final Peshawar Conspiracy Case. He subsequently helped build the pre-Partition communist movement in Punjab and, after 1947, played a role in organising Pakistan's early trade union federations. Despite this record of political struggle, Qurban remains largely absent from the historiography of the South Asian Left, appearing only in passing references. This article draws primarily on two underutilized sources: Aslam Raheel Mirza's rare Urdu biography Punjab kay Inqilabi Rehnuma (1995) and Iqbal Leghari's 1979 doctoral dissertation, which includes interviews with Qurban conducted in 1975. These sources are compared with existing literature on the Peshawar cases, the CPI-CPP transition, and Pakistan's labour federations, while M.N. Roy's memoirs help explain the institutional setting of Qurban's training. Using a qualitative-historical method based on source criticism, the article reconstructs Qurban's life, including his birth in Lahore's Mochi Gate quarter, his journey to Tashkent, imprisonment, role in reorganising Punjab's communists, and trade union leadership after 1947. Although sources disagree on some details, the article reports these differences rather than resolving them. Overall, it argues that Qurban was an important political figure whose contribution has largely been forgotten due to political repression, party secrecy, and limited historical records.

KEYWORDS: Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of Pakistan, Peshawar Conspiracy Cases, Hijrat Movement, Pakistan Trade Union Federation, Political Sociology, Biographical Method

Introduction

Most histories of British India and Pakistan are still written around constitutional negotiation – around the leaders who sat across the table from each other, representing the Congress, the Muslim League, or the colonial state itself. Almost by construction, this leaves out an entire cast of activists whose political world was made up of trade unions, peasant committees, and underground party cells rather than legislative chambers.

This neglect is especially visible in the history of Pakistan's communist movement. Banned twice within its first two decades, much of its archival material was confiscated or simply lost, and the scholarship that exists has tended to orbit the nationalist story rather than movements like this one.

Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban's career falls squarely into that gap. Born in Lahore in 1902, he crossed into Afghanistan during the 1920 Hijrat Tehrik, received military and political training at Tashkent, stood trial in the last

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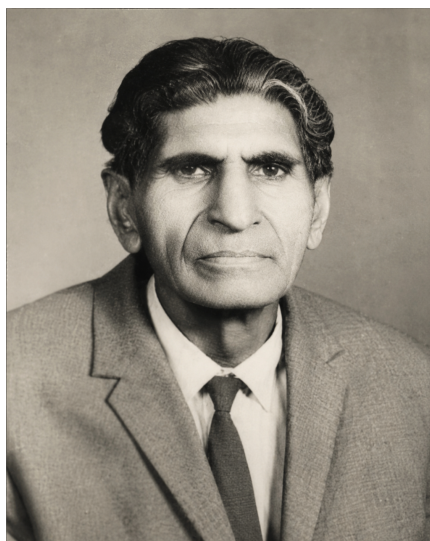
of the five Peshawar Conspiracy Cases, and then spent roughly three decades organising railway and industrial workers in Punjab – first under colonial rule, and later under a Pakistani state that, as this article will suggest, inherited more of that administration's instincts than is often acknowledged. He appears, briefly, in Ahmed Salim's (2016) study of the Peshawar cases and in Kamran's (2011, 2013) work on the transition from the CPI to the CPP. Beyond that, there is no dedicated account of his life in English.

This article tries to close that gap using a source no previous scholarship has examined: a rare, out-of-print Urdu biography by Aslam Raheel Mirza, of which only one copy is known to survive. That biography is treated here as evidence to be weighed, not as settled fact – its claims are checked, wherever this is possible, against the available English-language sources, and the places where the two disagree are flagged rather than smoothed over.

What follows tries to do three things at once, though they are really one project seen from different angles: reconstruct Qurban's political biography as fully as the surviving evidence allows; place that biography within the broader history of Punjab's communist movement and Pakistan's early trade unions, in both of which he was an active participant; and ask, more speculatively, why some left-wing leaders of his generation are remembered while others – Qurban among them – have largely dropped out of the historical record, a question that turns out to have almost as much to do with party discipline and state repression as with anything resembling historical insignificance.

Figure 1

Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban. Reproduced from Punjab kay Inqilabi Rehnuma (Mirza, 1995, p. 19), digitally restored by the author for improved clarity



Research Methodology

This study follows a fairly standard qualitative-historical design: documentary analysis, combined with triangulation across sources. That approach fits the material, if for a slightly deflating reason – no single account of Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban's life is complete, and what exists is scattered thinly across sources of quite different kinds.

Primary sources

The central source is Aslam Raheel Mirza's *Punjab kay Inqilabi Rehnuma* (1995), published by Asian Publishers in Lahore – specifically its chapter on Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban (pp. 19-41). Not every claim in this biography can be independently verified, so it is treated here as an important historical source rather than as unquestionable fact. Its claims have been checked, wherever possible, against other reliable material, and anything that could not be confirmed independently is identified as such rather than folded silently into the narrative.

A second primary source, of a rather different evidentiary character, is Leghari's (1979) doctoral dissertation on Pakistan's socialist movement, which preserves a series of interviews with Qurban conducted by Leghari in Lahore in 1975 – sixteen years before Mirza's biography appeared – and it was recorded by a scholar with no affiliation to the communist movement Qurban belonged to. Mirza's account is a later, commemorative retelling written from inside the movement; Leghari's is a contemporaneous transcript recorded from outside it. The two are treated here as independent of one another, and where they agree or disagree, that is reported as such rather than letting one silently overwrite the other.

Secondary Sources

Secondary material comes from the peer-reviewed literature on the Peshawar Conspiracy Cases (Salim, 2016), on the CPI-CPP transition (Ali, 2011, 2013), on Punjab's communist movement (Singh, 1994), on Pakistan's labour federations (Ahmad, 2016), and on the wider Ghadar-Hijrat-Tashkent networks (Ramnath, 2011), alongside institutional and archival material on the Pakistan Trade Union Federation.

Alongside Mirza's biography, this study also draws on Abdul Rauf Malik's memoir *Surkh Siasat: Kitab-e-Zeest ke Chand Phatay Auraq* (2017). Malik was a veteran communist activist and publisher – he ran the People's Publishing House – who knew Qurban personally, and his memoir offers first-hand recollections that fill in some of what Mirza leaves out, particularly around Qurban's family background and his standing within Punjab's communist circles. As with Mirza, Malik's account is treated as an attributed personal recollection rather than an independently verified fact and is corroborated, or flagged as uncorroborated, using the same procedure described in Section 2.3.

Triangulation and Discrepancy Reporting

Where Mirza's account lines up with the secondary literature – as it does on the outline of the 1927 Peshawar trial and the 1948 founding of the PTUF – this is treated as corroboration. Where the two diverge, both versions are reported, rather than one being quietly preferred over the other. Several such discrepancies recur through this article: the length of Qurban's 1927 sentence (four years in Mirza's telling; five years reduced to three on appeal in Salim's court-record-based reconstruction; three years in Qurban's own 1975 recollection to Leghari); the geographic setting of his 1920 arrest en route to Tashkent (Qurban himself recalled, via Leghari, that this happened “in Turkey”, though the reasoning below suggests this more plausibly reflects Soviet Turkestan, a reading consistent with Mirza's own account of the same episode and with what is known about Red Army deployments in the region at the time); the year the PTUF was banned (1953 in Mirza's account; 1954 in Ahmad's labour history); and, most significantly, Mirza's complete silence on the 1947 breakaway “Pakistan Communist Party” and on Qurban's 1948 expulsion from the CPP – an episode documented independently in Ali (2011) and in Qurban's own 1975 testimony, discussed at greater length in Section 12. None of these discrepancies has an obvious claim to greater reliability in itself. Where the balance of evidence does favour one account, as with the Turkey/Turkestan question, that is stated and reasoned through explicitly, rather than settled by silent preference.

Limitations

This study rests mainly on published sources rather than archival ones – the original records of the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), British intelligence files, and the Comintern archives were not consulted directly. Mirza's chapter was written for a regional Urdu readership and from a left-wing standpoint, and it has been read with that in mind, its factual claims weighed against other available sources wherever this was possible.

Historical Background

Qurban's political life only makes sense against the wider currents of the early twentieth-century subcontinent – constitutional nationalism, Pan-Islamism, revolutionary anti-colonialism, and socialist thought, all pulling at once, often on the same people. Many young activists of the period moved between more than one of these currents over the course of their lives, and Qurban's own trajectory was no exception: he entered politics through the Khilafat and Hijrat movements before turning to Marxism, to which he then gave the rest of his working life.

Punjab under British rule had, by this point, been reshaped by a land revenue system, an expanding railway network, and a growing printing industry – all of which produced, as a kind of by-product, a new class of wage workers and, with it, eventually, the raw material for trade unionism. The colonial government, meanwhile, kept a close watch on political activity and restricted dissent wherever it appeared. It was in this atmosphere that the Khilafat Movement (1919-1924) emerged in support of the Ottoman Caliphate and found wide support among Indian Muslims (Minault, 1982) – and it was this movement, in turn, that fed into the 1920 Hijrat Movement, in which Qurban, along with several thousand other Indian Muslims, crossed into Afghanistan.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 gave that migration an unexpected second act. Many of the migrants who had reached Afghanistan carried on to Tashkent, which had by then become something of a hub for Indian revolutionaries – Ghadar Movement veterans, the Berlin Committee, and the more recent Hijrat migrants among them (Ramnath, 2011). In October 1920, a group of these activists founded the Communist Party of India in Tashkent. The colonial government took the growing links between Indian revolutionaries and Soviet Central Asia seriously enough to respond with a series of legal proceedings – the Peshawar Conspiracy Cases, held between 1922 and 1927 – and it was in the fifth and final of these, in 1927, that Qurban himself was prosecuted.

Early Life and Family Background

Qurban was born in August 1902 in the Mochi Gate quarter of Lahore's old walled city into the Kagay Zai community. His father, Malik Karam Ilahi, worked as a compositor at the Government Printing Press (Mirza, 1995, p. 19) – a skilled trade, but a salaried one rather than a landed one, and Qurban grew up accordingly in a working-class urban household, a background that plausibly shaped his later commitment to labour and communist politics.

Abdul Rauf Malik adds detail that Mirza's biography does not include. This information comes from his own father's personal acquaintance with the family. According to Malik, the family's connection to printing went beyond simple employment. They owned and published the pre-Partition Urdu newspaper *Ehsan*. This suggests that Qurban's later column for the same paper (discussed in Section 8) continued a family tradition, rather than marking an outside association. Malik also records that Qurban was the eldest of four brothers – Noor Ilahi, Ihsan Ilahi, and Mehboob Ilahi – and that he had a daughter named Rifaqat. He notes, more generally, that the family had a reputation for its interest in education and literature (Malik, 2017, p. 34).

He matriculated in 1919 from Islamia High School at Sheranwala Gate, Lahore. But two small childhood experiences seem to explain his later politics better than his schooling ever did. Both are recorded in Mirza's account. His maternal uncle worked at the railway workshops. Young Qurban used to bring him his midday meal there. This gave him an early, close look at the conditions railway workers faced. In 1917, his father's department moved to a hill station for the summer. This was a routine practice under the colonial administration. Qurban went along with his father. There, he saw firsthand the hardships faced by the press workers who made this same seasonal move every year (Mirza, 1995, p. 19). Neither event was a dramatic political awakening on its own. But together, they point to the two worlds, printing press labour and railway labour, that Qurban would spend the next three decades organising.

The Hijrat Journey: Lahore to Kabul (1920)

What pushed Qurban to leave was the wave of Tehrik Hijrat that followed Maulana Abdul Bari Farangi Mahali's fatwa declaring British India Darul Harb – a land no longer fit for Muslims to live in. A Mujahireen Committee based in Lahore was organising departures for those willing to migrate, and it was through this network that the eighteen-year-old Qurban left in 1920, apparently without telling his family in advance: Mirza's account has his parents trying, unsuccessfully, to intercept him once they realised he had gone (Mirza, 1995, pp. 20-22).

His route out of Punjab – arranged through a guide connected to Maulana Abdur Rahim – took him and several other young men through the tribal areas, via Peshawar and Jalalabad, to Kabul. Mirza renders this passage in some detail, including its physical hazards and the caravan of traders the group attached itself to for safety along the way (Mirza, 1995, pp. 22-24).

By the early 1920s, Kabul itself was crowded with several thousand Muhajirs, and the Afghan government's response to this influx was selective: those judged capable were kept back for training; the rest were sent home. Qurban was among those retained. The list of names Mirza gives for this group – Ferozuddin Mansoor, Mir Abdul Majid, Khan Akbar Shah, Gauhar Rahman, Sultan Mahmud, Abdullah Safdar, Rehmat Ali Zakariya, among others (Mirza, 1995, pp. 24-25) – matches, almost name for name, the roster of Muhajirs who would go on that October to found the Communist Party of India in Tashkent, as documented independently in Ahmed Kamran's history of the CPI's origins (Kamran, 2016) and in Ahmed Salim's (2016) study of the Peshawar cases. That an Urdu commemorative biography and two separate English-language academic sources, drawing on entirely different archives, converge on this precisely is among the stronger pieces of corroboration this study can offer.

Tashkent: Training, Hardship, and the Founding of the CPI

The journey onwards from Kabul to Soviet Turkestan crossed the Amu Darya, and it is here that Mirza's account becomes unusually vivid about the physical cost of the crossing: roughly two hundred Muhajirs made it across in stages, through desert and mountain terrain, and at least two were killed by bandits before the survivors reached the river's Soviet-held bank (Mirza, 1995, pp. 26-27). They were received, on arrival, with a formal welcome – a speech, reproduced at some length in the book, that promised both military and political-ideological training and cast the group's presence in explicitly internationalist terms: the October Revolution held up as a model, the end of landlord and capitalist exploitation, and an invitation to see the struggle against British rule in India as an extension of the same cause (Mirza, 1995, pp. 27-29).

Training was not without its dangers. One sub-group was captured by hostile Turkoman forces and held until Bolshevik Party officials intervened to secure their release, and the training camp itself later came under attack from Basmachi (anti-Bolshevik Turkic) forces – an engagement that, by Mirza's account, produced casualties on both sides before Red Army units restored order (Mirza, 1995, pp. 29-31). Of the roughly thirty-four trainees in Qurban's cohort, about eight were picked out for further instruction at what the book calls a “Red Academy” – very likely the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow, the same institution named in the secondary literature on this cohort (Ramnath, 2011; Ali, 2013).

A rare piece of first-person corroboration for this period comes from an interview Iqbal Leghari conducted with Qurban in Lahore in the spring of 1975. Qurban recalled that his group, having been turned away by Nadir Khan in Afghanistan for lack of resources, decided to press on toward Soviet territory rather than stay behind as teachers, and that they were arrested en route – in his recollection, “in Turkey” – on suspicion of being Bolshevik agents, narrowly escaping execution before a Red Army detachment intervened (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, pp. 23-24).

It is worth pausing on a geographic discrepancy here. Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey were, by 1920-21, moving toward cooperative relations, which makes a Red Army rescue on Anatolian soil rather implausible; Soviet Turkestan, by contrast, was contested ground where the Red Army was actively fighting Basmachi forces – precisely the scenario Mirza's account describes for a sub-group captured nearby (Mirza, 1995, pp. 29-31). Mirza, as a lifelong member of the same communist network, likely had closer access to how these events were remembered and told within the movement, and in any case the overland route from Afghanistan to Tashkent runs through Turkestan rather than anywhere near Turkey. On the balance of the available evidence, Mirza's version is more plausible. The likeliest explanation is a conflation of “Turkistan” and “Turkey” introduced somewhere in transcription or translation, some fifty-five years after the events themselves, rather than any lapse in Qurban's memory. This article follows Mirza's version accordingly but flags the discrepancy here explicitly so that it is not carried forward silently as settled fact the next time Leghari's transcript is cited.

The Communist Party of India was founded in Tashkent that October, and Mirza's roster of retained Muhajirs places Qurban among its founding cohort – broadly consistent with, if not identical in emphasis to, the accounts given by Kamran (2016) and Salim (2016). Irfan Habib's account adds a further layer: following the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, M. N. Roy travelled to Tashkent, where he persuaded several Indian Muhajirs to take up communism and helped establish the CPI there. From Tashkent, Roy then sought to send politically trained revolutionaries back to India, many of whom were subsequently arrested and tried in the Peshawar Conspiracy Cases (Habib, 2021, pp. 4-5).

Muzaffar Ahmad's memoir offers a useful contemporary account of the CPI's establishment in Tashkent, the organisation of the Indian emigrant section, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, and the Peshawar cases themselves. Ahmad never names Qurban, but his account still helps to situate the wider revolutionary and organisational environment in which Qurban trained and began his political career (Ahmad, 1970, pp. 28-198).

Once his military and political training in Tashkent was complete, Qurban, along with other Indian revolutionaries, was sent on to Moscow on Roy's instruction for further ideological study. There he was enrolled in the Indian Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East and passed the MA examination in Sociology (Mirza, 1995, p. 32) – a credential that, one could argue, leaves its trace in the sociological register of his later political writing.

Roy's own memoirs never mention Qurban by name, but they remain a useful window onto the apparatus cadres like him would have passed through. Roy describes, in fairly considerable operational detail, the political and military training programme he built in Tashkent for young Indian Muslims who had originally left home to join Kemal Atatürk's forces in defence of the Khilafat, many of whom were then redirected, with Soviet backing, toward revolutionary training instead (Roy, 1964/1984, pp. 455-458). He notes that a portion of these emigrants were “half-educated young men” whom he set about “politically educating”, deliberately separated from the more religiously fanatical mass so that training could go ahead (Roy, 1964/1984, p. 462). Roy also mentions that one of these young men later became “an equally fanatical Communist” and was believed, at the time Roy wrote, to be living in Pakistan (Roy, 1964/1984, p. 462) – though he never identifies this person, and there is no way, from the evidence available here, to confirm that he meant Qurban. Even so, the anecdote is useful for what it says about how Indian Muhajir revolutionaries were recruited and trained in Tashkent under the Comintern, and it fits what is otherwise known of Qurban's own political development. The connection strengthens somewhat later in this article, where Qurban's own testimony confirms training at the same institution.

Direct evidence of that training comes from Qurban's 1975 interview, preserved in Leghari's (1979) unpublished dissertation. There, Qurban describes reaching Tashkent and receiving political and military training at what he called “M. N. Roy's political military school to train Indian revolutionaries for the liberation of India, with Soviet assistance”, adding that the school was closed in 1921 under British pressure (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979)

He went on to recall studying for four years at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow before returning to India via Italy in early 1926, under instructions from Roy to help establish a communist party – only to be arrested soon after and sentenced to three years' imprisonment in Peshawar (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, p. 24). This first-person account is direct evidence of his training under Roy, and it also lends support to Salim's (2016) conclusion that Qurban served a three-year sentence rather than the four years Mirza (1995) reports.

It is worth noting explicitly what this testimony does and does not establish: it confirms Qurban's general training under Roy's Tashkent school, but it does not settle whether he was the specific, unnamed figure in Roy's own anecdote above – that narrower identification would need further archival work to resolve.

Return to India and the Fifth Peshawar Conspiracy Case (1927)

Mirza (1995, pp. 34–35) describes Qurban's return to British India as a lengthy overland journey from Soviet Russia through both Europe and Asia. After completing his studies in Moscow, he travelled through the North Caucasus and Sochi before continuing west through Berlin and Hamburg. From there, he passed across France and Switzerland into Italy, where, during his stay in Milan, he met Dr Iqbal Shaidai—a figure independently documented as having been associated with the Provisional Government of India in Kabul. Mirza further records that Qurban returned east through Moscow and Kabul before re-entering British India. This route is summarised in Figure 2. This detail is independently confirmed in Leghari's 1975 interview: Qurban's own recollection there likewise describes returning to India via Italy in early 1926 (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, p. 24). That two sources written decades apart – a commemorative Urdu biography written from within the movement and a contemporaneous interview transcript recorded by an unaffiliated scholar – converge independently on this detail of the return route is, if nothing else, a useful, modest confirmation of Mirza's reliability on this particular point.

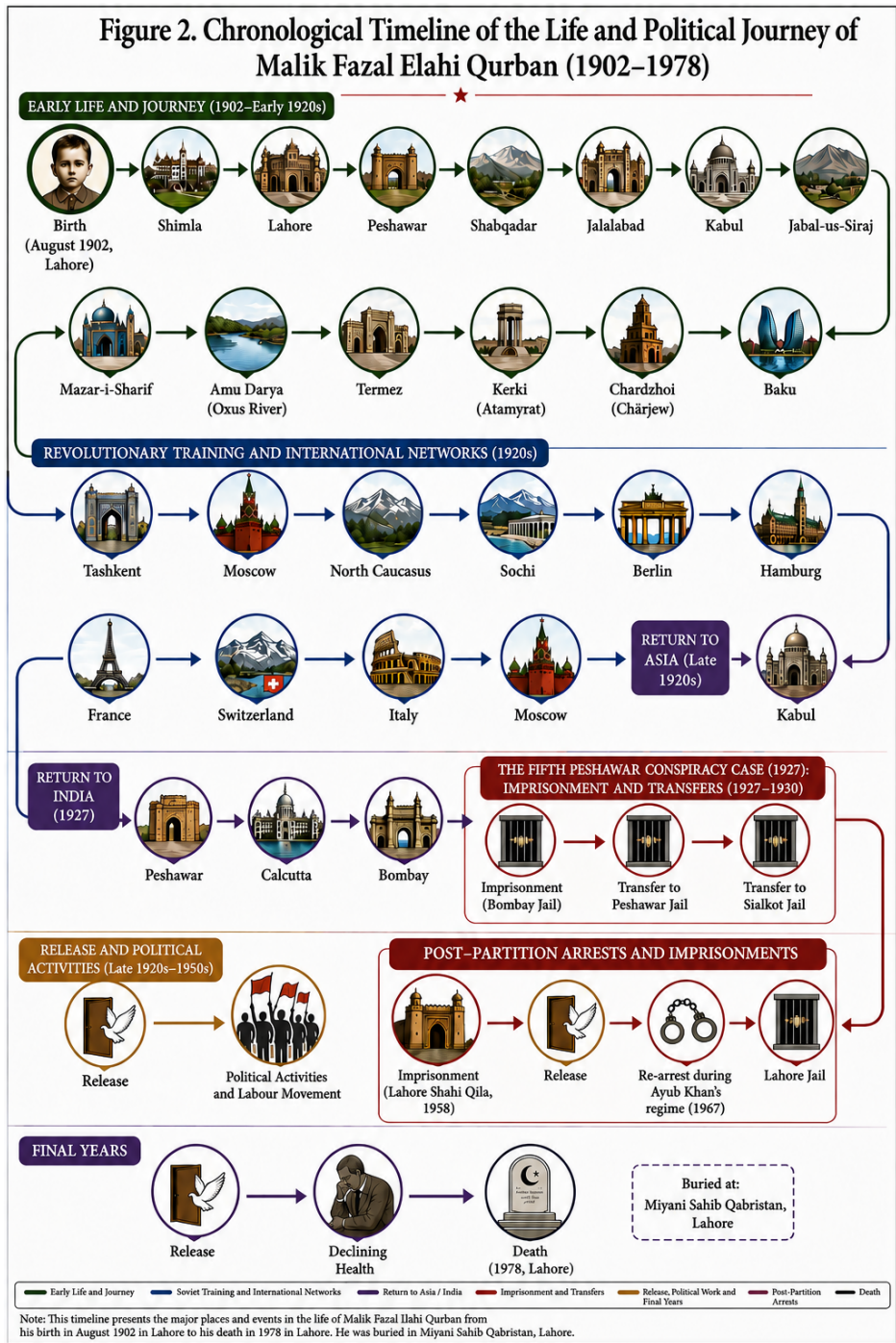
Yaqubi (2013) adds a detail that neither Mirza nor Salim records: that Qurban reached India on 17 January 1927 and was attached, before his arrest, to revolutionary circles in Calcutta, where he took part in discussions on the future organisation of the communist movement (Yaqubi, 2013, p. 94). This is independent corroboration from outside the article's existing evidentiary base, and it also does some useful work in bridging a gap in the narrative: Mirza's account picks up with Qurban already in Bombay Jail without explaining how he got there, and Yaqubi's Calcutta connection plausibly fills that in.

From Bombay Jail, Qurban was transferred to Peshawar Central Jail – a move that put him beyond the reach of whatever local support network he might otherwise have had – where he was held in solitary confinement and chained, the other end of the chain in the hands of a sentry stationed outside his cell. Mirza's account describes the sentry deliberately jerking the chain at night, over two or three nights, to deprive him of sleep (Mirza, 1995, p. 36). Qurban eventually struck the sentry with his slipper, and the sentry – concealing his own provocation – accused Qurban before the jail superintendent of verbally abusing him. Qurban's defence turned on a simple point of language: as a Punjabi speaker facing a Pathan sentry, he could hardly have abused the man in a language he understood. The superintendent accepted this, and once Qurban admitted to the chain incident itself, it was agreed that the sentry would stop shaking the chain and instead call out periodically to confirm the prisoner's presence (Mirza, 1995, p. 36).

Qurban was arrested and held on bail of Rs 5,000 before trial, then tried and convicted in what became the fifth and final Peshawar Conspiracy Case – brought, like the four before it, under Section 121-A of the Indian Penal Code, the same charge used against earlier Tashkent-trained returnees (Salim, 2016). On the length of his sentence, the two sources this study relies on simply disagree. Mirza has him serving four years' rigorous imprisonment across Peshawar and Sialkot jails as what the book calls a “state prisoner” (Mirza, 1995, p. 37). Salim's (2016) reconstruction,

built from British intelligence and court records, gives a different figure – an initial five-year sentence, reduced to three on appeal by the Additional Judicial Commissioner, who compared the case to Shaukat Usmani's parallel three-year sentence in a related Moscow Conspiracy proceeding. Rather than settle this by preferring one source over the other, it is left here as an open question – one that further archival work, ideally against the original Peshawar court records, could resolve.

Figure 2
Chronological Timeline of the Life and Political Journey of Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban (1902–1978). Compiled by the author primarily from Punjab kay Inqilabi Rehnuma (Mirza, 1995), with selected details corroborated from other sources, and designed by the author with AI-assisted visualisation.



Rebuilding Punjab's Communist Movement (1930s)

Prison did not end Qurban's political career – if anything, Mirza's account presents what followed as its more durable phase. Working alongside Comrade Sindhi Khan and Comrade Abdul Salam of Okara, he helped organise a series of successful strikes at cotton mills in Okara and Lyallpur in the years immediately after his release and went on to work under Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim in the North Western Railway Workers' Union, where he helped establish – and became the first president of – a Provincial Workers Committee that functioned as the Punjab branch of the All India Trade Union Congress (Mirza, 1995, p. 37).

When the Communist Party was reorganised nationally in 1933-35 and a Punjab provincial committee formed, Qurban was among its founders, alongside Ferozuddin Mansoor, Mir Abdul Majid, Karam Singh Mann, Sohan Singh Josh, and Kedar Nath Sharma (Mirza, 1995, p. 37) – a roster that lines up closely with the Punjab CPI leadership documented independently by Gurharpal Singh (1994) and Ali (2011). With Mansoor, he went on to found the Progressive Publicity Bureau and an associated Karl Marx Library, publishing worker-oriented pamphlets under titles like *Lal Jhanda* (Red Flag) and *Mazdoor* (Worker), and for a time wrote a column for the daily *Ehsan* (Mirza, 1995, p. 38).

Qurban's own account, as recorded by Leghari, adds some texture to the internal dynamics of this founding group. He attributed friction with Sohan Singh Josh partly to personal rivalry, recalling that Josh “considered himself to be the most intelligent and therefore wanted to be the leader of the Party in the Punjab” (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, p. 26). Josh, interviewed separately by Leghari, offered a rather different explanation, putting the Kirti group's comparative weakness down to its own lack of an established leader (Leghari, 1979, p. 26) – a reminder that even first-hand testimony from this period does not all point the same way.

Abdul Rauf Malik's memoir adds a further dimension: he places Qurban, alongside Teja Singh Sutantar and other Punjab revolutionaries, in the orbit of the Kirti Party, which had grown out of the Ghadar Party's earlier revolutionary legacy and become one of Punjab's principal left-wing organisations. Malik also records Qurban's role as something like a mentor outside the formal party structure – his own elder brother, Abdullah Malik, was drawn toward communist politics partly through Qurban, whom he describes as a close friend of their father. This kind of informal, generational transmission is not something Mirza's account, focused as it is on organisational milestones, is well placed to capture, which makes Malik's testimony a genuine complement rather than mere repetition (Malik, 2017, p. 68).

This decade is, not coincidentally, both where Qurban's career is best documented and where the primary and secondary sources agree most closely – consistent with a broader pattern in which Punjab's inter-war communist reorganisation is comparatively well recorded, against the thinner record of both the preceding Tashkent years and the post-Partition period that follows.

Revolutionary Writings and Political Publications

Alongside his organising work, Qurban was also active as a writer, translator, and publicist. With Dada Mansoor, he established the Progressive Publicity Bureau in Lahore, through which he produced the first Urdu translations of two of Marx's shorter economic works – *Value, Price and Profit* and *Wage Labour and Capital* – while also developing a pamphlet-publishing programme aimed at political education and class consciousness among workers (Mirza, 1995, p. 38). Mirza also attributes several original publications to him beyond this translation work: *Qaumiyat* (Nationality), *Awara-e-Watan: Muhajireen dar Roos* (The Homeless Ones: Emigrants in Russia), and the shorter booklets *Lal Jhanda* (Red Flag) and *Mazdoor* (The Worker). The title *Awara-e-Watan* is worth pausing on – it seems to reflect Qurban's own experience of the Hijrat Movement and his revolutionary training in Soviet Central Asia,

discussed earlier in Sections 5 and 6. He also kept up a regular column in the daily *Ehsan* through this period (Mirza, 1995, p. 38). Taken together, these writings position Qurban as more than a labour organiser – as someone who helped produce and circulate revolutionary print culture, translating foundational Marxist texts into Urdu while also writing original political material aimed at educating and mobilising the emerging working-class movement in colonial Punjab.

Labour Organising and the Pakistan Trade Union Federation

Partition did not so much interrupt Qurban's trade union work as relocate it. The Pakistan Trade Union Federation was founded at a conference in Lahore attended by fifty delegates from Punjab and the NWFP, with Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim elected president. Mirza dates this founding conference to February 1948 and has Qurban elected vice-president, alongside Sufi Allah Dad and Sobho Gianchandani also holding office (Mirza, 1995, pp. 39-40) – a more specific claim than the secondary literature offers, which gives a January 1948 date for the PTUF's founding and lists Qurban among its prominent leaders without specifying an office (Ahmad, 2016). The few weeks' discrepancy most likely reflects the difference between an initial organising meeting and a formal inaugural conference, though the sources at hand cannot confirm this either way.

The PTUF operated for several years under mounting state pressure before it was banned – 1953 by Mirza's account, coinciding with the outlawing of the Communist Party of Pakistan; 1954 in Ahmad's (2016) labour history. Whichever date is correct, Mirza adds a detail the secondary literature lacks: within months of the ban, Qurban founded a successor organisation, the Pakistan Mazdoor Federation, under the presidency of Khawaja Hussain (Mirza, 1995, p. 40). This independently confirms a reference in Shahbaz Ahmad's (2016) study of Punjab's labour movement to a “Pakistan Workers Federation” led by “Khawaja M. Hussain”, with a general secretary named “Malik Qurban” – a figure that study does not otherwise identify, but who, on the strength of Mirza's account, can now be confirmed as the same Fazal Elahi Qurban.

An edited compilation of primary and secondary material on Pakistan's labour movement supplies one further data point. Discussing the North Western Railway Workers' Union – led at the time by Mirza Ibrahim, alongside more militant CPI-aligned organisers such as C.R. Aslam and Erik Cyprian – the volume lists Qurban among the union's older cadre, placing him in the “M.N. Roy group”, a current within the union that emphasised industrial peace, increased production, and workplace discipline, on the reasoning that industrial peace guaranteed good output and thereby increased the prosperity of the working class (Islam, 2018, p. 54). This is a useful complement to the PTUF and PMF material above – it identifies Qurban with a specific labour tendency, moderate and productivist, tracing its lineage back to Roy's political line and distinct from the more militant current represented by Aslam and Cyprian within the same union.

Later Life

Rather than offer a conventional closing biography, Mirza's chapter ends with one precise, rather evocative summary figure: across his life, Qurban spent eight years in exile and eleven years in imprisonment (Mirza, 1995, p. 41). The eight years in exile most plausibly correspond to a period abroad following the PTUF's suppression in the early 1950s – consistent with a separately sourced account of Qurban fleeing to Moscow around 1951 amid the wider crackdown that followed the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case (PUWF, n.d.) – though Mirza's own text does not specify where this exile actually took place.

In this closing passage, Mirza describes him as tall, even-tempered, and self-educated: unlike the children of wealthier families, he never passed through any major institution of higher learning, acquiring his education instead

through manual work and self-study, living among the labouring people whose organisation became his life's work (Mirza, 1995, p. 41).

Mirza's account also gives the circumstances of Qurban's death, which the article's timeline reflects but which deserves stating plainly here: a chronic illness contracted during his final imprisonment in Lahore Central Jail worsened after his release – secured through Mian Mahmood Ali Qasuri's legal defence – until it confined him to his deathbed. Qurban died on 28 November 1978 and was buried in Miani Sahib graveyard, Lahore (Mirza, 1995, p. 41). In the months before his death, he was reportedly heard reciting a couplet of his own composition more than once:

آگ تھے ابتدائے عشق میں ہم

خاک ہو گئے ہیں انتہا یہ ہے

Āg thay ibtidā-e-ishq meñ ham, khāk ho gaye haiñ intihā yeh hai
("We were fire at the beginning of love; in the end, we have become ashes.") (Mirza, 1995, p. 41).

Leghari's dissertation narrows this gap somewhat. Discussing the left's resurgence around the rise of the Pakistan People's Party in the late 1960s, Leghari notes that "some old socialists such as Fazl Qurban, Zaheer Kashmiri and Mohd Panah, who had retired from active politics, were also inspired and joined the PPP movement" (Leghari, 1979, p. 141). This places Qurban as still alive and still politically engaged, if in a reduced capacity, around 1967-1970 – extending, though not really completing, the documented record beyond the mid-1950s silence noted above.

Political Thought and Sociological Reading

Qurban left behind no substantial body of theoretical writing, so his political thought is best read through his choices rather than his texts. Three things about that pattern stand out. His entry into communism was experiential rather than doctrinal – he arrived in Tashkent as a religiously motivated Muhajir and left it, some months later, having picked up a Marxist vocabulary for grievances – railway labour, printing-press labour – he had already observed as a boy. Once formed, his politics consistently took organisational rather than conspiratorial shape: strikes at Okara, a provincial workers' committee, a publishing bureau, a trade union federation, and then its successor once that federation was banned. And this organisational instinct proved durable across what was otherwise a sharp institutional rupture – the shift from colonial to postcolonial rule changed the state he was working against without changing the kind of work he actually did.

Read sociologically, it is this last point that is the more interesting one. Pakistan's early state inherited, more or less intact, the colonial repertoire of surveillance, banning orders, and preventive detention first used against Qurban in 1927 and redeployed it against much the same kind of activity – quite possibly, by the early 1950s, against Qurban himself – now in the name of national security rather than imperial security. His career is, in that sense, a useful small-scale illustration of a claim political sociology tends to make more often in the abstract than through individual biography: that the instruments of state discipline can outlast a change of regime more completely than the ideologies used to justify them.

Historiographical Significance

Qurban's near-absence from the historical record is not evidence of historical insignificance – it is better explained by three mechanisms that compound one another, one of which this study's own source comparison brings into view for what appears to be the first time. Ali (2011), along with the institutional record of the Pakistan Communist Party,

documents a 1947 breakaway “Pakistan Communist Party” led by Teja Singh Swatantar and Qurban, and Qurban's subsequent expulsion from the CPP in October 1948 on charges of factional “disruptionism”. Mirza's biography, by contrast, moves directly from the 1930s party-building years to the 1948 founding of the PTUF, in which Qurban serves as vice-president under Mirza Ibrahim, with no mention anywhere of a breakaway party or an expulsion. This is a genuine silence rather than a minor omission, and it is worth naming plainly rather than smoothing over: either the commemorative purpose behind Mirza's biography led its author to pass over an episode that reflected poorly on its subject's standing within the party, or the two source traditions are, in some way this study cannot resolve from the material at hand, describing slightly different chapters of an unusually eventful two years. Both readings are consistent with the wider historiographical pattern traced here, but settling which one is correct would require access to CPI/CPP internal records that fall outside the scope of this study.

Independent corroboration for the 1947 breakaway comes from Qurban's own testimony. In his 1975 interview, he confirmed joining Teja Singh Swatantar's separately declared Communist Party of Pakistan, citing disagreement with the CPI central leadership's post-Independence line on Pakistan and aligning instead with the Kirti group's push for a party organised on grounds of self-determination (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, pp. 34-35). He also recounted the new party's rapid collapse: communal violence drove Teja Singh and most of the Kirti's Sikh membership back to India within months, leaving a small Muslim remainder – by his own estimate only around seven per cent of the party's original strength – unable to sustain it (Qurban, as cited in Leghari, 1979, p. 35). This testimony corroborates Ali's (2011) documentation of the breakaway quite independently of Mirza, and it suggests a fairly straightforward, non-adversarial explanation for Mirza's silence on the episode: a party whose collapse was this rapid and this tightly bound up with Sikh out-migration may simply have seemed, to a later commemorative biographer, a minor footnote rather than a defining episode.

Beyond this specific tension, two further mechanisms compound Qurban's marginalisation. The first is external: the banning of the CPP and the PTUF in the early 1950s scattered exactly the kind of institutional records – party registers, federation minutes, and union newspapers – that would otherwise have preserved a fuller account of his later career. The second is linguistic: the fullest surviving account of his life exists in an out-of-print Urdu book with a single surviving copy, a form of archival fragility that affects the history of Pakistan's Left disproportionately, given how much of it was produced and preserved in Urdu and Punjabi rather than English.

Recovering figures like Qurban, then, serves a purpose beyond simple biographical completeness. It corrects a historiography that has, by relying so heavily on English-language and archivally well-preserved sources, systematically underrepresented exactly the kind of provincial, non-elite organising work – cotton mill strikes in Okara, a workers' committee in Lahore, a publishing bureau's pamphlet output – that made up the actual daily substance of the Pakistani Left, as distinct from its better-documented moments of high political drama.

A further, more contested data point on Qurban's later life comes from oral testimony rather than from Mirza's biography. Ameer Hamza Virk, an assistant professor of Political Science, recounts the following from a personal interview he conducted with Qurban during his own student research:

“In the era of Liaqat Ali Khan, Pakistan tried to establish relations with the USSR, and the contact was made through Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban. He had previously met Lenin and was also on friendly terms with Stalin, because Qurban had completed his education and revolutionary training in the early 1920s. During my student life, for my thesis, I met Fazal Ilahi Qurban. Qurban told me that he was attending the Afro-Asian Conference. I was in Turkey at that time. The government of Pakistan contacted me and requested that I contact Stalin and tell him that Pakistan wants to be friends with the USSR. But we have border issues with India, as India is a big country and we are a smaller country, and we feel threatened for our national freedom.’ Malik Fazal Ilahi telephoned Stalin from Ankara,

Turkey, and conveyed the Pakistan government's wishes. Stalin's reply was that if Pakistan wanted friendship with the USSR, the USSR would welcome it, would never leave its friends alone, and would defend Pakistan on the Wagah border if it was ever threatened by India. Stalin told Qurban to inform the Pakistani government that the USSR was ready for friendship and would help economically and industrially in every field. When Liaqat Ali Khan later visited the USA, the friendship with the USSR slowed down. Later, Hassan Nasir Shaheed met with the USSR ambassador seeking cooperation in Pakistan's development, and later still, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, as Minister of Petroleum and Natural Resources under Ayub, revisited and strengthened the relationship – cooperation in oil and gas began, and Pakistan Steel Mills was eventually built with Soviet cooperation, the groundwork for which, in this telling, traces back to Qurban and Hasan Nasir.” (Virk, 2020)

This account should be treated as oral testimony awaiting archival corroboration. It is not corroborated by Mirza (1995), which places Qurban in domestic labour organising during this same period, and it sits in some tension with the documented historiography of Pakistan-Soviet relations, which attributes the 1949 Soviet invitation to Liaquat Ali Khan to conventional diplomatic channels – a Pakistani diplomat's approach in Tehran – rather than to a Communist Party intermediary (Virk, 2020).

Conclusion

Malik Fazal Elahi Qurban's political life – from a printer's son in Mochi Gate through Hijrat and Tashkent, a Peshawar courtroom, and three decades of trade union organising in Punjab and Pakistan – turns out to be recoverable in far more detail than the existing English-language scholarship would suggest, once a rare Urdu primary source is actually brought into dialogue with that scholarship rather than left sitting outside it. This reconstruction is strengthened further by a source not previously connected to Qurban at all: Leghari's 1979 dissertation, which preserves Qurban's own 1975 testimony. That testimony corroborates several elements of Mirza's account, offers rare first-person confirmation of the 1947 breakaway Communist Party of Pakistan that Mirza's biography passes over in silence, and, on one point of geographic detail, helps clarify a geographical detail in Mirza's account rather than simply adding new information. That two independently produced sources, recorded sixteen years apart by authors with no connection to one another, converge this closely is itself evidence against the possibility that Qurban's story is simply one biographer's invention or embellishment.

Two things about this reconstruction are worth stating plainly, in closing. First, it is incomplete: the years after the mid-1950s remain undocumented in every source consulted here. Second, it is imperfect by design rather than by oversight – where the primary and secondary sources disagree, this article has reported both rather than manufacture a false certainty. That seems the more honest approach for a figure whose entire historiographical problem, in the end, is that too few sources have ever been asked to agree or disagree with each other in the first place. More broadly, it shows how combining neglected regional sources with established English-language scholarship can recover political actors who have largely disappeared from the historical record, enriching our understanding of both the communist movement and labour politics in twentieth-century South Asia.

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