

## CONJUGATED UNIVERSALISM: From Rural Pakistan to “Worker-Peasant Rule”

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One afternoon as I sat in my apartment in Jampur, a rural town in Pakistan’s peripheral South Punjab region, I got a call from Allah Baksh Baloch. During my field research on the region’s communist history, Allah Baksh mediated my access to various leftist political actors. He was well-positioned to do so, not just because of his youthful energy despite his elderly age but also because of his long-standing association with the Mao-inspired Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP), historically one of Pakistan’s largest communist parties. Through his party work, Allah Baksh had acquired many contacts across the region’s small towns and countryside. This time, he invited me to the rooftop of a commercial complex, located across the street from my apartment. On arriving, I saw Allah Baksh basking in the winter sun, his gray hair glistening. He was sitting next to a younger, well-built man who, when seeing me, stood up and introduced himself as “comrade Sarwar.” Sarwar, I soon learnt, was an independent journalist (we were sitting outside his office), as well as a member of the Trotskyist wing of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), one of the country’s flagship political parties.

At one point, our discussion turned to Leon Trotsky’s death, which Sarwar (naturally) blamed on Joseph Stalin. Allah Baksh, however, had a different take:

“Trotsky was in exile, in America, and he had illicit sexual relations with Frida Kahlo, the wife of the person he was staying with. Her husband then killed Trotsky.”

I told Allah Baksh it was now widely accepted that Trotsky was murdered at the behest of Stalin, who wanted to put an end to Trotsky’s mobilization against him. Further, Kahlo’s sexual liaisons with Trotsky did not trouble her husband, as they had an open relationship. Allah Baksh was unconvinced: “Didn’t America give freedom to women only recently? Wasn’t America like us only fifty to sixty years ago?” I somewhat agreed, but I didn’t understand his point. “So, if America was like our society when Trotsky slept with Frida Kahlo—if there wasn’t any freedom for women—how could he have gotten away with having sex with someone’s wife?”

Allah Baksh, who belonged to a Baloch tribe called Lashari, assumed that Baloch customs in this part of South Punjab, which bordered Balochistan province, resembled those in the United States when Trotsky was murdered (Trotsky was actually in Mexico City when he was murdered). The practice of respecting these customs is known as “doing Balochki” (*Balochki karna*) and constitutes part of a wider notion of Balochness or Balochiyat. And just as a man would be customarily killed in South Punjab for having illicit relations with another’s wife and thus violating Balochiyat, so too, Allah Baksh reckoned, it must have been the case in North America before women’s freedom.

By exonerating Stalin, Allah Baksh was implicitly defending the MKP’s political ideology, as the party aligned itself with a global Maoism that viewed Stalin favorably. Against a Trotskyist position that saw contemporary Pakistan as a *sarmayadari nizam* (capitalist system), making the proletariat the chief revolutionary subject, this Maoism also maintained that the country was “semi-feudal” (*nim-jajirdari*), thus rendering the peasantry a decisive revolutionary subject. This implied that the MKP’s historic political program of *mazdur kisan raj* (worker-peasant rule), a global sovereignty for *both* workers and peasants, also remained germane. Ultimately, Allah Baksh was defending this universalist politics when he exonerated Stalin—an exoneration made possible by widening the subjects of Balochiyat to include figures like Trotsky. That is, Allah Baksh both connected Balochiyat and Marxism and transformed the former’s parameters to defend the MKP and its goal of *mazdur kisan raj*: a conjugated universalism.

By conjugated universalism, I refer to how peasant revolutionaries like Allah Baksh connected and transformed ideational elements in the pursuit of a politics of universalism,<sup>1</sup> defined here as “structures of aspiration that direct a particular

message to all of humanity” (Li 2021, 4). My use of *conjugation* flags both *connection* and *transformation*, drawing on the term’s resonance with vocabularies of kinship (as in conjugality) and grammar (whereby verbs transform in particular relational contexts).<sup>2</sup> Conjugated universalisms stand in contrast to unconjugated ones, whose advocates do not engage in this connective and transformative ideational work. Rather, unconjugated universalisms—what others have variably described as “flat universalism[s]” (Campbell 2021, 360), “strong universalism[s]” (Kaviraj 2009, 182), or “North Atlantic universals” (Trouillot 2003, 35)—project and impose as universals what are actually particular (often European) experiences, all the while effacing their specific origins. From elevating the proletariat as the central revolutionary subject to imposing the free market and liberal democracy as aspirational standards for the world, various tendencies across the left and right have promoted an unconjugated universalist politics.

As I elaborate later, the Eurocentrism of unconjugated universalisms led to the emergence of certain “southern” theories—from Latin America’s decoloniality school to South Asia’s subaltern studies—that challenged universalisms entirely. However, recent debates across anthropology, political theory, and history have, for reasons that will become clearer, recentered the role of universalisms in the political struggles of the global South. Whereas some argue that various movements, from the Haitian Revolution to Third World socialism, were actually the true harbingers of universal Enlightenment ideals like freedom and liberty, others maintain that they promoted alternative universalisms exterior to the European fold. Drawing on an “anthropology of universalism” focused on the practice of universalism (Li 2020; Tsing 2005), I build on these recent debates by showing how political actors craft universalist projects through a dialogical mode involving combination and transformation—in short, conjugation—across various traditions. Much like “conjugated oppression,” which flags how class and other hierarchies *combine* in ways that *transform* the experience of oppression, the resultant conjugated universalism is “more than merely the sum of its constituent parts” (Bourgeois 1988, 330). I specifically explore how peasant revolutionaries conjugated across three traditions—Marxism, Balochiyat, and Siraiki nationalism—to add legitimating force and substance to the otherwise abstract universalism of *mazdur kisan raj*.

The article draws on more than twenty months of field and archival research in the South Punjabi districts of Dera Ghazi Khan and Rajanpur, research facilitated by my ambivalent positionality. On the one hand, Allah Baksh felt comfortable introducing me to his circle of revolutionaries because he knew that I broadly shared his political ideals, even if we often debated the specifics of revolutionary

theory and strategy. In fact, it was precisely these debates, which meant sharing my political positions rather than assuming an elusive neutrality, that strengthened his confidence in me as a comrade and thus someone who could be trusted (see also Plys 2020, 317–18). Allah Baksh and his comrades also understood intuitively my purpose there. In line with Mao Tse-tung's (1990) stress on "social and economic investigation," the MKP believed that conducting empirical research, or *tabqati jaghrafīya* (class geographies) (Alam 1975, 7), was necessary for revolutionary theory and strategy, and often published investigative (*tahqiqati*) reports. On the other hand, my urban, Western background enabled me, much like other researchers of Pakistan (Armytage 2018), to "study up" (Nader 1972), including by accessing police surveillance files.<sup>3</sup> Thus, my positionality, a simultaneous "sameness and otherness" that especially afflicts left intellectuals studying progressive movements (Portelli 1991, 39), shaped the sort of empirical materials I was able to collect for this essay.

In the article's first section, I trace the emergence of the MKP, focusing specifically on how the party initiated its politics of *mazdur kisan raj* by conjugating an otherwise Eurocentric Marxism. Influenced by Mao, the party sought to transcend Marxism's possible parochialism and connect it to Pakistan's specific relational context by transforming its parameters. The party also energized several of its peasant revolutionaries to conjugate—that is, to further the universalist project of *mazdur kisan raj* by both connecting and transforming ideational elements within their own even more specific contexts. In the essay's second and third sections, I focus on two such contexts: tribe and nation. Peasant revolutionaries specifically engaged with Balochiyat and Siraiki nationalism, not only connecting both with Marxism but also transforming their respective parameters to transcend any particularism that, like Eurocentric Marxism, might threaten the universalism of *mazdur kisan raj*. Indeed, attention to conjugation centers peasants as worldly actors whose practical and ideational labor destabilizes the universal/particular distinction, one that has often framed the study of universalism.

### CONJUGATING MARXISM

The founders of the MKP themselves sought to further *mazdur kisan raj* by conjugating Marxism—that is, by connecting it to, and transforming it for, Pakistani conditions. The party emerged as a critique of earlier Eurocentric communisms, in Pakistan and elsewhere, and, inspired by Mao's reinvention of Marxism for Chinese conditions (Dirlik 1983), sought to elaborate a communism for Pakistan. In the process of making this connection, party founders also transformed

Marxism: first, by claiming that various laboring classes, not just the proletariat, could be revolutionary subjects; second, by making what they called semi-feudalism and imperialism, not just capitalism, the object of critique and combat; and third, by recognizing the insurgent elements in local traditions and epistemologies. Owing to its Maoist inheritance, the party also encouraged the peasants it recruited to engage with their local traditions anew. As I detail later, several peasants conjugated Balochiyat and Siraiki nationalism to Marxism so as to legitimize and enrich the party's universalist project of *mazdur kisan raj*, one that sought to uplift humanity across differences.

The MKP emerged amid a popular movement that deposed the military ruler Ayub Khan in 1969 and a sharpening of strategic splits between the Chinese- and Soviet-aligned communist parties across the globe. MKP founders oriented to the “Chinese line” and believed that the Soviet Union was compromising with Third World capitalists in struggling against Western imperialism. Instead, they agreed with the Chinese Communist Party to argue that the “revolution must be led by the working class, supported by the great power of the peasantry, to travel the path of People's Democratic Revolution and then establish a socialist system” (Muhammad 1973, 6). Yet MKP founders also insisted that their revolution would be specific to Pakistani conditions. As the MKP founder and lawyer Afzal Bangash once told a public meeting in Lahore in 1976, “the revolution for which they were striving would be neither like Peking nor like Moscow, but purely Pakistani” (Special Branch, Punjab 1976). Here too, the party took inspiration from Mao (1965b, 199), who emphasized the necessity of constructing a locally legible communism. For instance, in his “mass line” politics, part of his (Mao 1965a) broader philosophy of practice, Mao called for revolutionary parties to both reflect the vernacular concerns of the masses in their theory and practice and to push the masses toward a communist internationalism. Indeed, it was Maoism's commitment to a vernacular-driven universalism—an implicit opposition, that is, to the unconjugated universalism the Comintern has been criticized for promoting during the interwar period (e.g., Chatterjee 2016)—that facilitated its global travels (Lovell 2019). Maoism, in other words, was a “worldly Marxism” (Ali and Raza 2022).

For their part, MKP founders conjugated Marxism to Pakistani conditions in three respects, and in doing so, they departed from prevailing leftist parties in the country like the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), which operated officially from 1948 to 1954,<sup>4</sup> and the socialist National Awami Party (NAP).

First, the MKP leader Eric Cyprian, once a member of the CPP, argued that communists should expand their organizing efforts beyond the urban proletariat

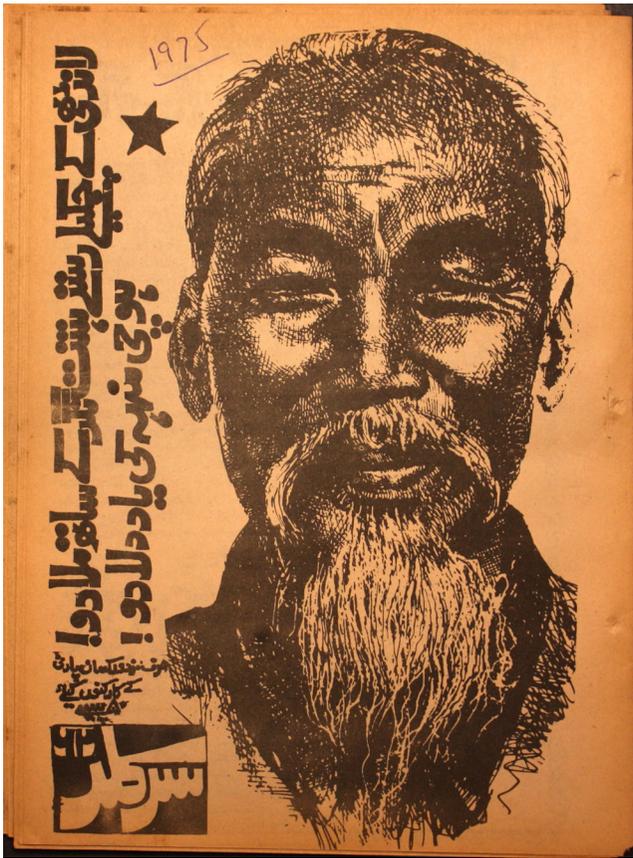


Figure 1. The cover for an issue of the MKP’s internal circular signals the party’s vernacular-driven universalism. The sketch is of Ho Chi Minh and the text reads “Connect the shining paths of Landhi to Hashtnagar—Remind us of Ho Chi Minh.” Landhi is an industrial area in Karachi, where an explosive workers’ struggle occurred in the 1970s. Hashtnagar is a rural area in the former North-West Frontier Province and was the site of a major MKP-led peasant movement in the 1970s. Clipping from the MKP’s *Circular*, no. 62 (June 1975).

Scanned by Noaman Ali.

to include peasant classes, where “the most decisive blows can be struck at the ruling class” (M. A. Ali 1952, 239). We see the party broadening communism’s revolutionary subject in its translation of Karl Marx’s internationalist slogan (“workers of the world—unite”): *Dunya bhar ke mehnat-kash, ek ho jao*. Drawing on a historical communist lexicon,<sup>5</sup> the party translated “worker” as *mehnat-kash* (toilers), not *mazdur* (its typical translation), likely to make the slogan resonate in their agrarian context. Unlike *mazdur*, *mehnat-kash* offers a more expansive category that can encompass the countryside’s diverse laboring classes, from smallholders to tenants and landless agricultural workers. Frantz Fanon engaged in a similar translation

exercise (Gordon 2010, 13). *Les damnés de la terre*, the French title for *The Wretched of the Earth*, is the first line in the French version of the Internationale, where “les damnés” refers to the proletariat. In using this line as the title for a book centered on the colonized world, with “les damnés” referring to its peasantry and lumpenproletariat, Fanon challenged the Eurocentric Marxist assumption that the continent’s proletariat constituted the vanguard revolutionary class. Yet by using the language of the Internationale to launch this provocation, he still affirmed his fidelity to an internationalist politics. Likewise, the MKP sought to advance Marxism’s universal promise through translations that inaugurated a revolutionary subject more aligned with a non-European context like Pakistan. The Mao-inclined MKP thus did not have the same “translation problem” (Kaviraj 2009, 179) that afflicted an earlier generation of communists in colonial India, who were often



Figure 2. “Singing the Internationale.” MKP members sing the Internationale at a party congress in Karachi in 1977. The MKP president Major Ishaq Muhammad can be seen standing at the far left. Clipping from the MKP’s *Circular*, no. 86 (November 1977).

Scanned by Noaman Ali.

accused of having their “head in Russia and body in India” (Shaikh 2021, 82), such that they organized according to categories ill-fitted for their milieu.

Second, by organizing “all the exploited sections of the people” under communist leadership (M. A. Ali 1952, 247–48), the MKP transformed Marxism’s object of critique and combat to include not just capitalists but also landlords and their imperialist patrons. For in places like South Punjab, the party mostly encountered *jagirdars* (landlords), not capitalists, many of whom were Baloch tribal chiefs (*tumandars* and *sardars*) whose ancestors had consolidated their authority by allying with the British Raj (S. Raza 2023).<sup>6</sup> In exchange for their loyalty, the Raj gave chiefs legal jurisdiction over their tribespeople, authorized their paramilitary apparatus, and granted them immense landed estates (*jagirs*) from which they collected both rents and the entire land revenue. Inspired by the populist pro-peasant rhetoric of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his PPP, peasants in South Punjab confronted these *jagirdars* in the early 1970s, demanding fairer sharecropping arrangements and an end to forced labor (*begar*). MKP founders soon lent support to these insurrections, as they believed the endurance of these colonially fortified estates in postcolonial Pakistan evidenced “semi-feudalism” and “semi-colonialism” (Muhammad 1972), both of which communists needed to confront. The party’s involvement also led to the peasants’ radicalization, as they began calling for the abolition, not reform, of *jagirdari* (feudalism), their ultimate aim being to establish a global subaltern sovereignty, a *mazdur kisan raj*.

Third, MKP founders sought to build a party oriented to the cultures, languages, and epistemologies of the masses. The party criticized the earlier CPP leadership’s infatuation with elite Urdu literary culture, which they saw as “feudal and imperialistic,” and which left the CPP “culturally alienated from the people of the soil” (Leghari 1979, 73–74). Party leaders sought to end this alienation in several ways, including through party mentorship programs and schools. Leaders often mentored the peasants they recruited, teaching them to read and write, which is in fact how Allah Baksh became literate. They also invited locals to party schools, where they exchanged ideas and collectively read and debated Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Indeed, the party inspired peasants to see “theory,” now an emic category, as a necessary part of a global liberatory struggle, even energizing some to “stretch” (Fanon 2004, 5) revolutionary theory to make it speak to the specificities of their own conditions. Even after the MKP effectively collapsed in 1977,<sup>7</sup> formerly affiliated peasants like Allah Baksh continued to renew Marxism. They sought to show that Marxism was not a foreign, Western import—not particular to Europe—but embraced logics that inhered in local traditions. More broadly,

peasant revolutionaries aimed to add culturally attuned substance and legitimizing force to the otherwise abstract universal goal of *mazdur kisan raj*.

This subaltern aspiration for universality challenges scholars who view universalism as principally an elite, European, and even authoritarian enterprise. Writing from the vantage point of South Asia, subaltern studies, for instance, contested both liberal and Marxist universalism on these grounds. Whereas the former presumed a universal human endowed with rights, the latter, in their reckoning, assumed a universal stageist history (Kaviraj 2009) that would teleologically culminate in a universal capital-labor conflict and proletarian emancipation (Chakrabarty 1989), often under the auspices of a universalized Bolshevik model of the party (Chatterjee 2016). Subalternists argued that subaltern politics should be understood not in these universalist registers of human rights, Enlightenment ideals, or class politics, but through vernacular vocabularies and concerns. Latin American decoloniality scholars went further in this emphasis on difference and particularity, arguing that subaltern lives, undergirded by their own epistemologies, inaugurate distinct worlds: a pluriverse (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Implicit in these Latin American and South Asian critiques are shared assumptions about universalism, viewing it as a Western imperialist imposition that, at best, effaces subaltern subversions or, at worst, legitimates their suppression. As Neil Lazarus (1999, 9) writes, these scholars “have written at length to condemn as naive or, worse, tacitly authoritarian, any commitment to universalism.” Yet this post/decolonial stress on difference, a “triumph of provincialism,” as Samir Amin (2009, 198) once called it, now appears to uncomfortably tally with resurgent authoritarian nationalisms.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps this partly explains the renewed interest in universalism as a political project within political anthropology, political theory, and history, among other fields. Except now, recognizing the violence and silences of elite-peddled unconjugated universalisms, scholars are “decolonizing universalism” (Khader 2019) in various ways, from theorizing a “Left universalism” (Sekyi-Otu 2019) to unearthing a “universalism from below” (Buck-Morss 2009, 106). Some political theorists even argue that subaltern anticolonial actors in the global South were actually the true harbingers of universal Enlightenment ideals like freedom and liberty (Buck-Morss 2009; Nesbitt 2008). Other political theorists and historians, however, maintain that anticolonial actors actually promoted “alternative universalisms” (Getachew 2016, 837) beyond Enlightenment ideals (A. Raza 2020b; Goswami 2012). From jihadism (Li 2020) to a progressive “Muslim International” (Daulatzai and Rana 2018) and Arab communism (Bardawil 2020),<sup>9</sup> political anthropologists

have recently explored a range of such alternative universalist projects as they interact with ethnographic conjunctures—what [Anna L. Tsing \(2005, 8\)](#) called “engaged universals.”

Drawing on these debates, a recent literature, often inspired by [Mikhail Bakhtin \(1981\)](#), centers the role of dialogical interaction across traditions in the formation of universalist politics ([Campbell 2021](#); [Gopal 2019](#); [Graeber and Wen-grow 2021](#)). Building on this perspective, I explore ethnographically a mode of dialogical practice oriented toward connection and transformation—that is, conjugation. Inspired by the MKP leadership’s own remaking of Marxism—an effort to smoothen the “friction” ([Tsing 2005](#)) involved in translating this ideology of European origin for Pakistani conditions—peasant revolutionaries conjugated across Marxism, Balochiyat, and Siraiki nationalism to deepen and further a universal project of *mazdur kisan raj*. In crafting this conjugated universalism, peasants implied the existence of a shared (albeit uneven) world of elite domination and exploitation. They also implied that the insurgent ideas needed to radically alter this global order could be found even in traditions that appeared vernacular or particular from various vantage points. This included Marxism, which, because of long-standing anticommunist propaganda by Pakistan’s elitist and Islamist parties ([Iqtidar 2010](#)), often looked irrelevant to the transformation of Pakistan to fellow villagers—that is, it looked particular to Europe. It also included Balochiyat and Siraiki nationalism, those seemingly “particularistic ties” often viewed as dividing subaltern politics in the subcontinent ([Chakrabarty 1989, 3](#); [K. A. Ali 2005](#)), not generative of a universal politics to remake the world. As peasant revolutionaries conjugated Marxism, Balochiyat, and Siraiki nationalism, they transformed their particularities into a universal, such that they put under strain, even transcended, the analytical distinction between the universal and particular.

### CONJUGATING BALOCHİYAT

Another winter morning, Allah Baksh took me to Jampur’s local courts (*kachahri*), a bustling place in the town center, where we went to the office of a lawyer named Rashid. Together with Allah Baksh, Rashid led the Kisan Ikath (Peasant Collective). Allah Baksh had created the group in 1985 as a “front” for the MKP, with the original aim of gradually recruiting peasants, irrespective of their preexisting ideological or party affiliation, into the party by assisting them with their day-to-day problems. Even as the MKP fractured and effectively collapsed, the Kisan Ikath endured well into the 2000s and, unlike other peasant organizations that emerged in Punjab ([Rizvi 2019](#); [Aftab and Ali 2023](#)), it still

sought to enroll the peasantry into a universal politics of *mazdur kisan raj*. The group defended peasants in several ways over the years, from organizing protests against local dealers selling tampered (*do-number*) fertilizers and pesticides to campaigning against the *jaqirdar*-led dispossession of smallholders. The organization also assisted peasants in their legal troubles, which often centered on police harassment, property disputes, and illicit sexual relations. Peasants otherwise intimidated by the courts approached the Kisan Ikath, and often specifically Allah Baksh, who, despite his peasant background, had acquired a reputation for his adeptness at navigating the courts, and for his connections to various lawyers. One of them, of course, was Rashid.

In his fifties with a large, twirling mustache, Rashid, as I quickly learned that winter morning of our first meeting, inhabited multiple, seemingly contradictory identities. Though he served as the Kisan Ikath's general secretary, Rashid was not ideologically aligned to the party behind the front, the MKP, but belonged instead to the same Trotskyist outfit as the journalist Sarwar. He was also a sharp and quick-witted intellectual, as well as the *sardar* (petty-chief) for a major Baloch tribe. He was as adept at navigating and popularizing French philosophy (he often quoted Jean-Paul Sartre in his speeches) as he was at detailing the intricacies of tribal genealogies and contestations. In fact, in his office that morning, our conversation eventually turned to the *qaba'ili nizam* (tribal system). I asked Rashid about it:

“People have told me that they're reluctant to go to the courts, that they'd rather resolve disputes within their *jirgas* or panchayats [tribal authority structures]. As a lawyer, what do you think of this?” Rashid answered: “You know the courts always favor the powerful over the weak. The rich over the poor. . . . Sometimes people can get more justice in tribal law [*qaba'ili qanun*] than in court law [*adalat qanun*].”

During my time with Allah Baksh, who belonged to the Lashari tribe, I realized he not only agreed with Rashid's position on Baloch tribal authority but went further. “Marx wasn't bringing anything new with communism,” he once told me. “He was simply bringing back tribal culture.” Allah Baksh was directly connecting the project of Marx and Marxism to Baloch tribal ideals and practices (that is, Balochiyat). However, he wasn't simply instrumentalizing communal forces for class struggles, as communists had done elsewhere (Bardawil 2020, 113–37); he was also transforming those very ideals and practices. The “tribal culture” Allah

Baksh believed Marx simply brought back was, in actuality, his own reimagination of that culture. In connecting Balochiyat to Marxism, he thus also transformed the former—a conjugation whose purpose substantiated the abstract universalism of *mazdur kisan raj*. As I explore in the following, Allah Baksh often pointed to elements within Balochiyat—specifically its relationality, adjudicatory institutions, and nomenclature—that could be connected with and incorporated into Marxism. At the same time, he also sought to transform Balochiyat, as he was alert to some of its elements, certain “frictions,” that threatened to undermine the universal promise of *mazdur kisan raj*.

One way Allah Baksh connected Marxism and Balochiyat was by incorporating the latter’s relational logics into the former. The activist-scholar Jodi Dean (2019, 10) has theorized the sort of relations communists aspire to build in terms of comradeship: a mode of political belonging based, she argues, on a shared critique of the present and a commitment to building a better future, a mode that involves both “discipline and joy.” In fact, Allah Baksh sought to construct relations along similar lines—except he disliked the word *comrade*, preferring *sathi* (fellow traveler), as it didn’t have a foreign, atheistic, and thus alienating quality to it. And to give substance to *sathi*, he found inspiration in his own milieu, specifically Baloch tribes and their elementary unit, the family. He often spoke of these tribal and familial relations as both “relationships of love” and “burden” (*bojh*). That is, they constituted relations in which agency was experienced not in opposition to obligation but in its fulfillment (Cody 2016), where love became manifest in the exercise of duty. For his part at least, Allah Baksh had come to see the Kisan Ikath as his tribe and family, consisting, as he once put it, “not only of [his] own blood but the blood of [his] children and family.” And he wanted other workers and peasants—be they a Kisan Ikath member or not, a Baloch or not—to also relate to one another in similar terms. He wanted to build a mode of communist political belonging that incorporated the relational logics of Balochiyat.

To concretely promote these logics within the Kisan Ikath, Allah Baksh turned to *jirgas* or panchayats, those tribal adjudicatory bodies Rashid defended that morning. Allah Baksh believed Marxism could be transformed for the better if it incorporated these institutions. “When Marx spoke about socialism,” he once told me, “all he was really trying to do was extend our panchayat system.” Allah Baksh meant several things by this. He believed that tribal panchayats implied a critique of courtly and state authority, one shared by Marxism. Through panchayats, ordinary people could potentially organize their own affairs, outside the mediation of political and economic elites. And through its processes, panchayats,

Allah Baksh believed, could consolidate forms of solidarity between cadres, which other institutions like the court system never could. By incorporating the panchayat into the Kisan Ikath, he wanted to build among members these critiques, this confidence in self-governance and, most importantly, this solidarity. And from the Kisan Ikath, Allah Baksh sought to “extend this tribal solidarity to the Communist Party and world at large.” Not only did relations of Balochiyat cultivate the sort of group solidarity needed to achieve *mazdur kisan raj*, they also, Allah Baksh implied, gave substance to the relational world this universalism would bring into existence.

Yet Allah Baksh also acknowledged certain limits or “frictions” to Balochiyat that could undermine this universalism. I became more aware of this during a debate that erupted between Allah Baksh and Rashid after the Kisan Ikath’s annual May Day (or International Workers’ Day) rally, a long-standing tradition here (Buhar 1976). In an internationalist spirit, leaders that day gave speeches connecting the plight of workers and peasants in South Punjab to the struggles of Chicago workers in the late nineteenth century during the Haymarket Affair, an event that marks the origins of May Day. But not a single woman was present at the rally, even though Kisan Ikath leaders insisted, echoing arguments in Marxist feminism (Federici 2004; Bhattacharya 2017), that women also needed “liberation” (*azadi*), as they “are oppressed two-times over,” in the field and at home. When I asked them about this absence later, Rashid got defensive. He suggested that women’s organizing was what American-funded NGOs did, and then later added that the Soviet Union’s first central committee had only one woman (implying women weren’t necessary for revolution). Allah Baksh disagreed: “The truth is that our *sathis* don’t want to stop doing *Balochki*.” “Doing *Balochki*” partly involved controlling women’s movements and maintaining strict gender segregation (*purdah*)—a patriarchal control often enforced through conventional panchayats, led by tribal elites who also used this institution to distribute patronage and bolster their sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Including women in the Kisan Ikath and its rallies and panchayats would thus violate normative Baloch ideals and practices (or Balochiyat). Leaders, Allah Baksh implied, feared doing this as it could undermine not just their reputation but their very personhood as a Baloch.<sup>11</sup> But if “doing *Balochki*” meant excluding half of humanity, how could it form part of any universalist politics?

Recognizing these frictions, Allah Baksh ultimately sought to transform Balochiyat to produce an entirely new revolutionary relationality. “Put aside your political affiliations, your social status, your familial or tribal disputes,” Allah Baksh (Baloch n.d.) once wrote in a leaflet, “and join the Kisan Ikath.” While this

relationality, what he sometimes called “political friendships” (*siyasi dosti*), would contain elements of tribal relations—that combination of love and duty—it would also form a new tribe. At one Kisan Ikath meeting I attended in the rural town of Dajal, a peasant leader began by thanking the tribally diverse attendees, adding that “our tribe is all of us assembled here.” In his own remarks, Allah Baksh made the point explicit: “We need to end our previous ties to tribe and caste and produce a new tribe—a *mazdur kisan* tribe.” Allah Baksh believed this possible because he understood the social constructedness of tribes. “Tribes are created over time,” he later added at the meeting, “and new tribes emerge.”<sup>12</sup> The new tribe, in his view, would be consolidated through panchayats mediated by the Kisan Ikath, not tribal elites, a point alluded to in the organization’s very name (*ikath* is another term for panchayats here). The tribe would ideally include women as equals as well. Ultimately, the new tribe he aspired to build would draw on but also transcend Balochiyat’s relational logics: it would incorporate all exploited classes, irrespective of tribal, ethnic, or gender differences, and be directed toward and reflect the substance of *mazdur kisan raj*.

Allah Baksh’s transformation of Balochiyat is further illustrated in his understanding of the term *sardar*. He and his comrades used the term in reference not just to chiefly figures like Rashid but also even to each other. To me, this showed how deeply entrenched *jaqirdari* was, such that even communists deployed its vernaculars, but Allah Baksh disagreed. “We want to bring the word to the bottom—to show that ordinary people are the true *sardars*, not the *jaqirdars*.” He also offered a unique etymology of *sardar*. Whereas others understood *sardar* to come from *sar* (head) and *dar* (holder of), such that *sardar* literally meant “holder of the head,” Allah Baksh mobilized another meaning of *dar*, as the gallows or impaling stake, meaning that a *sardar*, in his rendering, was someone at the head of death, even sacrifice. To him, the etymology of *sardar* thus connoted someone sacrificing themselves for the collective. His usage implied that ordinary peasants and workers, in their various toils that kept communities alive, were the ones sacrificing for the collective. They were the true *sardars*. While communists across the global South often translated and transliterated terms to further their politics (Crawford 2021; Shaikh 2021, 46–84), Allah Baksh also etymologized. By transforming the meaning of Baloch tribal nomenclature to elevate the toiling classes and their sacrificial, socially reproductive labor, he connected Balochiyat to Marxism, a politics for the toilers (and whose labor theory of value also uncovers the centrality of labor to society). He sought to demonstrate that communist politics could (literally) inhere in the terms of Balochiyat.

In the end, Allah Baksh's various conjugations of Balochiyat, from expanding its tribal relations to re-etymologizing its nomenclature, aimed to locally legitimize and substantialize the universalism of *mazdur kisan raj*—that is, to transform a possibly “abstract universal” into a concrete one (Sekyi-Otu 2019, 166–67; Mallick 2020). However, it remained uncertain whether this engagement with Balochiyat would serve this particular political purpose, especially in this part of South Punjab. Many local Baloch's ties to Baloch culture and language had weakened over the centuries since their ancestors first migrated here from the bordering Balochistan province. Many had also intermarried with other ethnicities in this diverse part of Punjab, which also bordered the Sindh province. Most, including Allah Baksh and Rashid, spoke Siraiki over Balochi. Many also identified ethnically as Siraiki, owing to the Siraiki nationalist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. As it turns out, some left-wing adherents of this movement believed that the nation, more than the tribe, was what needed to be conjugated with Marxism to legitimize and substantialize *mazdur kisan raj*.

### CONJUGATING THE SIRAIKI NATION

The term *sardar* came up on another occasion, this time by its absence. Shortly after I moved to Jampur, one of the Kisan Ikath's members, Sharif Pitafi, tragically died only in his fifties. In his honor, the Kisan Ikath held a *musha'ara*, a poetry symposium popular across the subcontinent. In South Punjab, *musha'aras*, alongside *melas* (festivals), have also been spaces to promote the Siraiki language and Siraiki nationalism, an ethnolinguistic movement that emerged in the 1960s calling for a “Siraiki homeland” (*wasaiib*). Among the hundreds that attended Sharif Pitafi's *musha'ara* were a few staunch Siraiki nationalists, who were also socialists. Alongside Allah Baksh and Rashid, these Siraiki nationalists gave rousing speeches. As I sat on the ground listening, protected from the midday sun by a wide tent, I noticed that several Siraiki nationalists referred to  *jagirdars* not as *sardars* (as most did), but as *chaudharis*. Whereas in upper Punjab, as elsewhere in the subcontinent, *chaudhari* is an honorific title of respect for landlords or other rural elites, in South Punjab, it commonly functions as a derogatory term for Punjabis. By using the term to refer to Siraiki  *jagirdars*, these Siraiki nationalists were excluding the region's landed elites from their imagined boundaries of the Siraiki homeland. They were channeling (or connecting) popular grievances against upper Punjab toward a Marxist critique of class exploitation and, in so doing, transforming the terms of Siraiki nationalism. By conjugating Siraiki nationalism in this way, they sought to give the universalism of *mazdur kisan raj* a legitimizing force and substance. But

much like tribe, this engagement with Siraiki nationalism, however radical, was also undermined by certain frictions, one that antinationalist communists sought to highlight.



Figure 3. A Kisan Ikath poster displayed on the stage at Sharif Pitafi's *mush'ara*. Pitafi is pictured on the left. The slogan *dunya bhar ke mehnat-kash, ek ho jao* (workers of the world—unite) is on the top. The rest of the poster lists the organization's main demands. Photograph by Shozab Raza.

First, some context. The Siraiki movement began as a literary and linguistic movement, only later becoming nationalist and socialist (Shackle 1977; Langah 2012). Emerging in the early 1960s, the movement promoted Siraiki as a distinct language from Punjabi, not a dialect, with its autonomous literary tradition. Centered in the major South Punjabi cities of Multan and Bahawalpur, the movement was also largely middle-class, consisting of poets, writers, and academics who gathered under the umbrella of organizations like the Siraiki Adabi Majalis (Siraiki Literary Assembly). Through various conferences and seminars, these organizations established a distinct script for the language and elevated mystic poets like Khwaja Ghulam Farid (d. 1901) as representatives of a unique Siraiki literary tradition. Yet even though not explicitly political, the Siraiki literary movement of this period incubated such a possibility. As the Siraiki scholar and activist Nukhba Langah (2012, xviii) argues, poets and folk artists created an “imaginative space . . . for the representation of Siraiki identity,” one that would become politicized by events in the 1970s. In 1970, the government ended the One Unit Scheme, which had amalgamated all provinces in West Pakistan into one administrative-political unit to counteract East Pakistan's influence as the province with a demographic majority. It angered some Siraiki-speakers that their areas were re-incorporated into the new Punjab province (Jaffrelot 2015, 187–88). Further, the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, partly driven by grievances over language, and, a year later,

the Sindh government's recognition of Sindhi as the province's official language also inspired Siraiki activists (Shackle 1977).

Soon, socialists and communists joined the burgeoning movement. They did so in part because of the political climate following Bhutto's toppling in 1977 and the launch of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship. While implementing a far-reaching Islamization program, Zia-ul-Haq also furthered the repression of the left begun by Bhutto (Toor 2011, 117–56). He banned political parties and open political activity, and arrested many oppositional party leaders, including several MKP leaders. Yet Zia-ul-Haq's regime, like any military regime, could not completely eradicate all progressive activity. Those who circumvented persecution for one reason or another continued to agitate, and did so through various fronts (a context that partly explains why Allah Baksh formed the Kisan Ikath). These included the Siraiki Suba Mahaz (Front for Siraiki Province) and the Siraiki Lok Sanjh, a cultural group. Through these fronts, the Siraiki literati and various socialists came together on one platform, with the latter using them as vehicles for socialist agitation.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, some socialists came to relate to these groups beyond strategic terms and to see in Siraiki nationalism elements that could be combined with Marxism to further a universal politics of *mazdur kisan raj*. One of them was Manzoor Buhar, a (now deceased) peasant leader of the MKP at the time Allah Baksh first joined. With the support of the party, Buhar led a large anti-police movement in his village in the mid-1970s, but after the MKP fractured in 1977, he began promoting Siraiki nationalism. Siraiki socialists like Buhar became convinced that their universalist aspirations, previously promoted by the MKP, could only be actualized in a "Siraiki homeland," envisioned as a separate province called Siraikistan. Influenced by leading figures like Taj Muhammad Langah, Siraiki socialism fashioned itself as a movement for economic redistribution, not just political recognition (see also Fraser 2000). It condemned the agricultural colonization of South Punjab during the postcolonial period, as the government allotted land to various outsiders, including military officials and settlers from India (both Punjabis and Muhajirs). It also criticized the uneven development of South Punjab vis-à-vis upper Punjab, as the government extracted natural resources from the former while investing disproportionately in the latter.<sup>14</sup> The movement positioned itself against what activists called the "Punjabi-Muhajir alliance" (Langah 2012, 25) or *takht-e-Lahore* (throne-of-Lahore), a state of affairs whereby Punjabis and Muhajirs ultimately colluded to dominate and exploit the entire country, not just South Punjab. Siraiki socialists essentially connected nationalism with Marxist theories

of uneven development, arguing that only in confronting this alliance and establishing a Siraiki homeland could they further the universal politics of *mazdur kisan raj*.

But some communists in South Punjab argued that Siraiki nationalism contradicted these universalist aspirations—they flagged frictions—as it would reproduce existing landed inequalities. One of them was Ghulam Akbar Baloch, Allah Baksh’s senior comrade and president of the MKP unit in Dera Ghazi Khan in the 1970s. Now an elderly man in his eighties, blind in one eye and boasting a thick, wavy mustache, Akbar believed the Siraiki movement would only benefit local landlords. “Who do you think will be Siraikistan’s chief minister?” he once asked me. “It’ll be a Leghari or another *jagirdar*. They’re the ones who’ll get more power and wealth.” Even though he acknowledged that South Punjab was underdeveloped in comparison to upper Punjab, Akbar did not think a Siraiki homeland would solve the problem. Interestingly, what also stimulated his opposition to Siraiki nationalism, his inability to see it as constitutive of a universalist politics, was what may have encouraged communists like Allah Baksh and Rashid to engage with Balochiyat. Namely, he did not identify as Siraiki, nor did he believe many in this part of South Punjab were Siraiki, even if they (like him) primarily spoke Siraiki. “We’re Baloch,” he told me. “It makes more sense for us to join the Balochistan province than join any future Siraiki province.”<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, he felt many Siraiki leftists, including former comrades like Buhar, had directed their universalist emancipatory ideals toward a project that would only betray them.

Akbar’s opposition to ethnonationalism drew on earlier debates within the MKP over “the national question” (*qaumi sawal*), debates that partially led to the party’s split in 1977. Whereas non-Punjabi MKP leaders, like the Pashtun Afzal Bangash or the Sindhi Feroz Ahmed, were more sympathetic to nationalist movements in the country, upper Punjabi leaders, notably MKP president Major Ishaq Muhammad, were far more critical. At meetings and public talks, Major Ishaq, as he was generally known, would insist that “old politicians would again come into power in different shapes” and that “slogans of provincialism and parochialism were being raised in the Punjab only to safeguard the decadent feudal-capitalist system” (*Special Branch, Punjab 1975*). He also once debated the notable Siraiki socialist and scholar Aslam Rasoolpuri.<sup>16</sup> When the latter referred to people in the Siraiki belt as “his people,” Major Ishaq took issue, responding “what do you mean *your* people?” Some Siraiki socialists, as well as certain Pashtun and Sindhi socialists, interpreted Major Ishaq’s lack of sympathy for ethnically based grievances as evincing his own Punjabi chauvinism (*Leghari 1979*, 221). But Akbar remained

unconvinced by these charges against Major Ishaq. He pointed to the recent ascendance of *jaqirdars* in the Siraiki movement as evidence that Major Ishaq was ultimately correct in his diagnosis of ethnonationalisms. Akbar was implicitly referring to groups like the Janubi Punjab Suba Mahaz (JPSM, Front for South Punjab Province), which, formed around 2018, was led by several elite politicians from South Punjab, including many *jaqirdars*.

However, several Siraiki socialists were themselves critical of this ascendance, and thus sought not just to connect Siraiki nationalism to Marxism but also to transform the former by redrawing the boundaries of the Siraiki nation to exclude *jaqirdars*. They believed that *jaqirdars* merely exploited the popularity of Siraikistan for their own electoral gain, having otherwise remained opposed or indifferent to the movement. Commenting on the *jaqirdar*-led JPSM, Nukhbah Langah claimed that it “was created without considering the aspirations of the indigenous population of Siraiki *wasaiab* and Siraiki nationalists who understand the ground realities of the region” (Birmani 2018). Siraiki socialists also went further to suggest that South Punjab’s *jaqirdars* were as implicated as upper Punjab’s elites in the uneven development of Punjab, with both classes also maintaining comprador alliances with Western elites. Most *jaqirdars* lived in upper Punjab, in cities like Lahore, or even abroad, in cities like Vancouver or London, where they reinvested surplus accrued from South Punjab. Many Siraiki socialists thus viewed the Siraiki movement as a class struggle to abolish *jaqirdari*, one conducted through the idiom of the nation. To them, their Siraiki nationalism aimed to “emancipate the local peasants from absentee landlords who had kept the area backward” (Jaffrelot 2015, 187). At Sharif Pitafi’s *musha’ara*, Rashid introduced me to one such Siraiki socialist, a member of the Siraiki Democratic Party, who told me: “The nationalist struggle is also a class struggle, not only against the upper Punjab exploiters but also against South Punjab’s *jaqirdars*.”

By waging a universalist struggle against class hierarchies through the mediation of the nation, Siraiki socialism mirrored other nationalisms. Scholars of Pakistan have recently argued that political actors in other nationalist movements in the country—from the recent Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Mallick 2020) to the creation of Pakistan itself (Tirmizey 2022)—saw nationalism as a vehicle for a more universal emancipation. Nationalists elsewhere in the global South similarly tied nation-building to “worldmaking” (Getachew 2019). Fanon (2004, 178), for instance, understood anticolonial nationhood as the first stage—one that subsumed the contradictions between subaltern classes to combat the larger contradiction between the colonizer-comprador and

the colonized—in a multistep process directed ultimately toward a universalism he called a “new humanism.” Fanon arrived at the universal through the mediation of the national—an “intricate dialectic-within-a-dialectic” (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, 78). Building from Fanon, Amin argued that postcolonial countries needed to prioritize the nation by “delinking” from the global capitalist-imperialist economy: a “three-phase dialectical movement from the false universalism of capitalist Eurocentrism to the affirmation of popular national development to the recomposition of a superior socialist universalism” (Amin 2009, 212; see also Amin 1990). Much like these anticolonial activists, Siraiki socialists believed nationalism could contribute to this movement toward the universal, especially if conjugated. By both connecting the Siraiki nation to Marxism and transforming its boundaries to exclude *jaqirdars*, this conjugated Siraiki nationalism, they believed, substantialized an otherwise abstract notion of *mazdur kisan raj*. It gave to this universalism a local, cultural resonance and thus a legitimatizing force.

## CONCLUSION

The political theorists Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena (2021, 361) recently noted that scholarly discussions around decolonization often center on critique or deconstruction, rather than on “what arguably was the primary context and aspiration of anticolonial argument: an attempt to reconstruct viable political futures in the aftermath of European domination.” In this essay, I ethnographically explored one such reconstructive project, led by communist revolutionaries and directed toward the achievement of a universal subaltern sovereignty: a *mazdur kisan raj*. Revolutionaries pursued this goal by ideationally and practically connecting and transforming (or conjugating) traditions variably viewed as particular—specifically Marxism, Balochiyat, and Siraiki nationalism—toward what I termed a conjugated universalism. By both enrolling and transforming the particular into the universal, peasant revolutionaries not only enriched the universal with the particular, to paraphrase Aimé Césaire (2010, 152), but effectively put a strain on, even transcended, this conceptual distinction, one that has conventionally framed the study of universalism.

While the MKP did not achieve its universal goal of *mazdur kisan raj*, it seems even more urgent and necessary today to insist on a universalist politics as an emancipatory horizon. Writing in 1988, Amin (2009, 177) argued that capitalism, in imposing itself (albeit unevenly) on the world through imperialism, created a “demand for universalism,” not only as an analytical endeavor but also as a political project. Only in thinking and organizing on the very universalist registers that

capitalism itself operates could the system be overturned. Indeed, as the African political theorist [Ato Sekyi-Otu \(2019, 14\)](#) has suggested, to reject universalism on the grounds that it is imperialist/capitalist/Western is itself a concession to these forces, as it means participating in their own conceit that only they can be the universal's purveyors. He goes on to show how various African traditions have also claimed the universal. Today, additional dynamics—from superpower conflicts in our multi-polar world to the climate crisis and escalating jingoistic nationalisms—arguably add to the demand for universalism. Even a subaltern scholar like [Dipesh Chakrabarty \(2009a\)](#), once a chief critic of universalism, has conceded that the climate crisis, with the shared sense of catastrophe it has elicited, now demands a universal thinking and practice (but without, he qualifies, Hegelian teleology or the subsumption of particularities). Perhaps today, then, more than needing “universalism for Africa's sake,” as [Sekyi-Otu \(2019, 12\)](#) put it, we need a universalism for the planet's sake. While the MKP's peasant revolutionaries show us how to reclaim the universal for an emancipatory politics, they also alert us to the historical limits of left universalisms, whose horizons did not – but now certainly should – extend beyond the human.<sup>17</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Across anthropology, political theory, and history, scholars are recentering the role of universalisms in the radical political struggles of the global South. Whereas some argue that these movements realized and even shaped Enlightenment universalisms, other scholars maintain that they promoted alternative universalisms. In this essay, I explore how political actors craft universalist projects by combining and transforming—in short, conjugating—ideational elements across various traditions, European and otherwise, with the resultant “conjugated universalism” more than the sum of its constituent parts. I focus on peasant revolutionaries belonging to Pakistan's Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP), the country's historically largest communist party, who conjugated across various traditions—including Marxism, Baloch tribal ethics, and Siraiki nationalism—to substantialize and legitimize the otherwise abstract universalism of “worker-peasant rule” (mazdur kisan raj). This attention to conjugation centers peasants as worldly actors and destabilizes the universal/particular distinction, one that has conventionally framed the study of universalism. [universalism; internationalism; Marxism; tribes; nationalism; peasants; Pakistan]*

### NOTES

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1. A related way to think about universalism is in terms of the global applicability of analytical concepts—a dimension I do not focus on here, though others have so (Chibber 2012; Chakrabarty 2009b).
2. Because of this emphasis on both connection and transformation within certain relational contexts, *conjugation* departs from adjacent concepts like *syncretism* or *articulation* (Hall 1980). The transformative inflection to conjugation is perhaps why Philippe Bourgois (1988) uses the term in his concept of *conjugated oppression*. See also Lerche and Shah 2018.
3. I specifically accessed the Punjab Police's Library of the Special Branch in Lahore, which houses surveillance files from the 1800s to the present. Part of the reason I was given access, I suspect, is that communist activity is, given the decline of the left, no longer a priority of state surveillance, as it once was in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of heightened communist activity and from which most of my archival material comes.
4. For scholarship on the CPP, see K. A. Ali 2015, Malik 2013, and Toor 2011.
5. In the 1930s, for instance, a Punjab-based communist party called the Kirti Kisan Party launched an Urdu weekly from Lahore called *Mehnat Kash* (Harshvardhan 2022; on communist periodicals during this period, see also A. Raza 2020a). Toilers, the translation of *mehnat-kash*, was itself a category used in the international communist movement, as exemplified in the name for the Soviet Union's training school for international communist leaders: the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.
6. Each tribe usually has only one recognized head chief, the *tumandar*, but there are many petty-chiefs, called *sardars*. Usually, any male members of the chiefly clans, and even heads of non-chiefly clans, give themselves the title of *sardar*.
7. There were several reasons for this, including disagreements among the MKP leadership over the party's relationship to ethnonationalism and over which rural class to prioritize organizing, the landless agricultural laborers or tenant farmers (N. G. Ali 2019, 252–56).
8. Indeed, as others argue (Nassen Smith 2022), certain postcolonial critiques of universality resembled Martin Heidegger's critique of Enlightenment universalism, one that arguably shaped his own fascist sympathies.
9. Elsewhere, I explore how MKP figures engaged with Islam in their universalist project (S. Raza 2022).
10. Women accused of illicit sexual relations, for instance, are labelled *kali* (dishonored) and then punished according to the *kali qanun* (honor codes). Panchayats variably ruled that the women in question be sold into slavery, exchanged in marriage (*wata-sata*), and even murdered.
11. Male MKP members in the 1970s similarly worried about the reputational costs of confronting patriarchy, a position that women activists in the party criticized strongly (Ali and Raza 2022).
12. In fact, Allah Baksh's mother belonged to a Punjabi Jat caste (Hanbi) that, after centuries of intermixing and intermarrying with local Baloch tribes, now identified as Baloch. See also Fryer 1876, 18.
13. This per my interview with Aslam Javed, a progressive Siraiki journalist who tragically died in 2018.
14. On South Punjab's underdevelopment, see Ahmad 2022.
15. In this, he echoed movements like the Baloch Muta'ahida Mahaz (Baloch United Front) that, in the 1970s, distributed pamphlets "demanding that D.G. Khan district be

included in the Balochistan province at once" (Special Branch, Punjab 1972). Notable scholarship on Siraiki nationalism (e.g., Langah 2012) has not considered these contestations over the boundaries of the "Siraiki nation," especially in Baloch-dominated South Punjabi districts like Dera Ghazi Khan.

16. Allah Baksh provided me with details of this encounter.
17. On how "left internationalism" has not sufficiently engaged with the nonhuman, see Çubukçu forthcoming.

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