* **Intellectually vibrant Karachi: Part – I**
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* October 6, 2019

Though lately Karachi has remained in the news for all the wrong reasons – garbage, law and order, potholes, rainwater, and what not – credit is due to its community of intellectuals who keep the torch burning.

Whenever this columnist finds himself in the city, there are numerous stimulating events to attend. Sadly such events hardly get any attention on national-level media which appears to be highly biased, and more interested in highlighting what is wrong rather than what is right. Agreed, the media is the monitor of wrongdoings, but an occasional bit of good encourages those who have strived to keep the spark alive.

But first something about a couple of organizations and a few people who have worked so hard over the decades to keep Karachi dynamic. Two of these are Irtiqa and the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA). The PMA has been active since the early days of Pakistan. Many progressive medical professionals have inspired and led the PMA over the decades. They include names ranging from doctors M Sarwar, Adeeb Rizvi, Zaki Hasan, and Rehman Hashmi to doctors Haroon Ahmed, Tipu Sultan and Sher Shah Syed. The PMA has been in the forefront of struggles for rights not only of the ailing population and doctors, but also of people in general.

The PMA has been ready to offer its premises to groups of activists and intellectuals who want to gather for a worthy cause. The PMA hall, which now needs better air-conditioning and PA systems, has accommodated countless people who come here to participate in events, or just to join hands for a better society. The PMA is a shining example of how a bunch of dedicated people can continue to register their concerns and raise their voices against injustices in society. PMA stalwarts have withstood pressure from dictatorships and the decadent alike.

Irtiqa was the brainchild of a group of intellectuals who came together in the late 1980s to launch a quarterly Urdu journal, ‘Irtiqa’ (evolution) and also establish the Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences. The founders included friends such as Ali Yawar, Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqi, Faqir Muhammad Lashari, Hasan Abid, Prof M Naseer, Rahat Saeed, and Wahid Bashir. Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui was a critic of Urdu literature, dean of social sciences at Hamdard University, and writer of many books. He wrote a literary column for daily ‘Dawn’ with the nom de plume Ariel, and had a wide readership.

Hasan Abid was a professor of Urdu language and literature and a noted progressive poet with a couple of poetry collections to his credit. Rahat Saeed is one of the prime movers behind the revival of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in Pakistan. Prof Naseer was an educationist, and Wahid Basheer was an active journalist, poet, and trade union leader. When Irtiqa was launched in 1989, who would have thought that this journal would survive for three decades? The first editorial board members were Faqir M Lashari, Hasan Abid, Rahat Saeed and Wahid Basheer, with Noshaba Zubairi and Zeba Alvi as assistants.

F M Lashari was a renowned Sindhi poet and intellectual who died early and Dr M A Siddiqui joined the board. Later M Muzahir assumed the responsibilities of Noshaba Zubairi. Noted scholar Dr Jaffar Ahmad joined the team in the mid-1990s and is the current editor of ‘Irtiqa’ journal. The Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences is not a degree-awarding institute; it rather caters to the intellectual needs of Karachi by organizing conferences, seminars and regular sessions on topics covering nearly all spheres of life. It also organizes two different annual memorial lectures in the name of Prof Hamza Alavi and Hamza Wahid.

Hamza Alavi was one of the most prominent social scientists from Pakistan who taught at some of the top universities in the UK, including this writer’s alma mater the University of Leeds. Hamza Wahid was an activist and intellectual. She fought against dictatorships from Generals Ayub to Zia, waged struggle for women’s rights, and helped her husband, Wahid Basheer, in his political activities. The Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences has benefitted greatly by the tireless efforts of people such as Iqbal Alvi and Ali Yawar. Iqbal Alvi is almost 90 years old now and still moves around the city to attend discussions and gatherings.

Irtiqa Institute’s current moving spirit is Kaleem Durrani, a former student leader and activist. He has taken over from Iqbal Alvi and, following in his footsteps, arranges regular gatherings and meetings. Ali Yawar died on September 5 this year and Irtiqa – in collaboration with the PMA – held a reference for him on September 28. Being in Karachi, this writer availed himself of the opportunity to remember Yawar Bhai with his family and friends at the PMA hall. Ali Yawar was one of those unsung heroes of the political struggle in Pakistan who sacrificed a lot for the realization of a democratic, progressive, and secular society.

He was born in 1945 and became politically active in the late 1960s when he was in his 20s. In a way, Ali Yawar was a bridge starting from the generation of my father that included some of the names mentioned above such as Iqbal Alvi, Dr Haroon, Dr Adeeb Rizvi, and many others. That generation of progressive activists were politically active in the 1950s and left an indelible mark on the people’s movement in this country. With the imposition of martial law in 1958, democratic politics in Pakistan suffered a staggering blow.

With an onslaught of gigantic proportion by the state machinery led by the military dictatorship of self-appointed field marshal and president, General Ayub Khan, politics was crushed under a heavy yoke. When that generation became older, a new generation appeared in the 1960s with activists such as Ali Yawar, Amir Hyder Kazmi, Jam Saqi, Kaleem Durrani, Meraj Muhammad Khan, Nadeem Akhtar, Rasheed Hasan Khan, Usman Baloch, and many others. This generation precipitated the decline of the Ayub regime, many got enchanted with Z A Bhutto’s charisma, but most kept the progressive streak intact.

Ali Yawar – just like Rasul Bakhsh Palijo – was not one of those who were charmed by Bhutto’s rhetoric of Islamic socialism. When many left-wing activists and leaders got carried away, Ali Yawar stood his ground by opposing Bhutto. He took the reins of the NSF from Rasheed Hasan Khan and kept its dynamism alive. He was opposed to the military action in East Pakistan and was arrested and spent almost a year in jail in 1970-71. After Bhutto assumed power in 1971, Sindh became mired in ethnic strife mainly because the Urdu-speaking population was strongly opposed to the introduction of Sindhi language in schools and rural-urban quota system.

Ali Yawar was one of those who strived to mend fences between the old and new Sindhis, and never succumbed to ethnic politics as many had done. When I was in college in the early 1980s, Ali Yawar had already passed his youthful student activism, but he did become a bridge between the generation of the 1950s and my generation of the 1980s. My closer interaction with him started in the late 1980s during the early years of Irtiqa. Ali Yawar was in his mid-40s and I was in my mid-20s but we struck a good association.

We frequently gathered at the homes of Hasan Abid near Urdu College or at Rahat Saeed’s place in Nazimabad. Of course, the senior lot was responsible for the selection of articles and essays for Irtiqa and editing them. Juniors like me were helping them in proofreading and other minor tasks, but more than the Irtiqa journal, Ali Yawar was interested in the Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences. During the 1990s, he organized many national-level conferences and seminars, gathering intellectuals from all over Pakistan. In the early 2000s, I moved out of Karachi, and lost regular contact with Yawar Bhai. He remained active with his political and trade union activities.

Then I heard he had developed Parkinson’s disease. The last I met him was at a hospital when Wahid Basheer was terminally ill, and his daughter Dr Nida was taking care of him. Yawar had come to hospital to see the last of Wahid Basheer. Little did we know that Parkinson’s would soon consume Ali Yawar too.

To be continued

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