

Hamza Alavi: An Obituary
By Asad Sayeed
(Published in Monthly *Herald*, February 2004)

Hamza Alavi, Pakistan's most noted social scientist, died in Karachi on December 1, 2003 at the age of 82. Apart from being Pakistan's most accomplished social scientist in international academic circles, Hamza lived a remarkably rich and active life.

Born in Karachi in 1921 in a Bohra business family, he did his initial schooling in Karachi and then went to the Aligarh University and the Gokhale Institute in Poona. Thereafter at the age of 24 Hamza joined the research department at the Reserve Bank of India and at the time of partition he opted for Pakistan. He rose to the position of heading the State Bank operations in East Pakistan and subsequently as one of the five principal officers of the newly formed central Bank, all before he was thirty years old.

Hamza resigned from the State Bank in 1953 and went off to Tanzania to try his hand at farming. Having soon discovered that it was not his cup of tea and a subsequent illness, Hamza Alavi and his wife moved to London where he involved himself in political activism. He helped form the Pakistan Youth League, the Pakistan Socialist Society and after the Ayub coup, along with a group of Pakistanis he formed the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy. His activism, however, transcended politics and Pakistan specific concerns. Hamza also played a key role in establishing forums against racial discrimination in the UK as well as international forums on left politics.

Hamza Alavi is best known and remembered for his academic work. The span of his academic work is truly astonishing. From the more abstract issues of state theory, the colonial mode of production and the social structure of south asia under the impact of colonialism, Hamza Alavi has written on subjects as varied as the role of US aid to Pakistan, Islam and ethnicity, kinship, the impact of the green revolution on the peasantry and lately on the role of Islam (or the lack of it during the Pakistan Movement). His unfinished project was to trace the roots of political Islam in the sub-continent, specifically with reference to the Khilafat Movement.

Hamza Alavi's scholarly interests were a true mirror of his socially concerned and politically involved personality. In the 1950s, when Pakistan closely aligned itself with the US, Hamza wrote a series of papers on the political and economic dimensions of this alliance. After the Green Revolution in the 1960s, he was interested in understanding its impact on the peasantry. At the time of the liberation of Bangladesh, he sought to understand the nature and form of the Pakistani state that could wreak such havoc on its own people. Then in the 1980s when ethnic strife became the dominant form of violence in society, Hamza sought to understand its basis. The rise of fundamentalism in Pakistani society then prompted him to work on its socio-political basis as the last project of his life.

Hamza's contribution to understanding Pakistan's political economy is not only invaluable in its own right, but provides the conceptual basis for approaching a number of issues in new and changing circumstances. His work on the nature of the

state in Pakistan, on ethnicity and on the factional basis of political mobilization in Pakistan is of particular relevance today. The running theme in all three works is that the constitution and evolution of social classes has to be seen in the light of the specific historical legacy of South Asia mediated with colonialism. This particular evolution, as Alavi argued in his landmark paper on the state in Pakistan and Bangladesh was that no one class or group holds the balance of power decisively in its favour.

Hamza's most cited work – rarely would one find a scholarly paper or a reading list in a relevant Sociology course at the best universities in the world where this article is not cited – on the nature of the state argues that none of the dominant social classes in Pakistan are powerful enough to control the state. The state thus acquires a mediating role and hence its power. Alavi thus characterizes the post-colonial state in Pakistan and Bangladesh as 'over-developed' with respect to the level of development in the region. This paper has been the basis for countless formulations on the state – not always in agreement with Alavi – both in South Asia as well as other developing countries.

Hamza's work on kinship which is based on his 15 month stay in a Punjab village has been the precursor for subsequent research on patron-client relationships and the lingering continuity of kinship and caste based political mobilization in the rural areas. The insight that local level politics in the rural areas is organized on factional basis – rather than class or ideology – and that these factions then link up in a pyramidal structure at higher levels to access private and public goods from the state implies the fundamental rationality on the part of the electorate. A number of empirical studies on the electoral process have subsequently demonstrated such a process at work. This aspect of Hamza's work should be recommended reading particularly for apologists of military rule and those naïve urban soles who believe that lack of education renders the democratic process in Pakistan meaningless and a pray in the hands of elites.

Hamza's work on ethnicity was prompted by the rise of the MQM in the late 1980s. His explanation for the rise of the mohajir ethnicity was based on the material conditions of what he termed as the 'salarariat.' He defines the salariat as "a product of the colonial transformation of Indian social structure in the nineteenth century and it consists of those who have received an education that equips them for employment in the state apparatus at various levels as scribes and functionaries." Whether or not Alavi's characterization of the salariat is an accurate reflection of reality, he has shown the way that rather than look for some primordial explanation for the rise of ethnic politics or to consign it to conventional class categories, historically grounded and dynamic explanations have to be sought.

Hamza Alavi's scholarship was built on two important stools. First, it is important to note that Hamza did almost all his scholarly work in numerous European and North American universities. One cannot conceive of being able to produce such quality and socially relevant research if he had lived in Pakistan or for that matter in any other developing country, barring India. Poor societies do not have the intellectual or physical resources necessary for such intellectual endeavours. It was Hamza Alavi's good fortune that he was in the right place at the right time to have bequeathed the wealth of knowledge and ideas to us. Second, without the social concern that was part

of Hamza's persona he would not have worked on issues so relevant to our concerns. For those of us living and working in Pakistan, with the right attitude we can hope to take Hamza's illustrious legacy forward, even if we cannot do full justice to it.