

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: A Political Visionary and a Historical Luminary

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Abstract—The present article reconceptualises Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as not just an educationist but as a political visionary. Drawing upon his various engagements as a Congressman, speeches and communication along with available literature, this article delves into his understanding of political issues of his time. His elaborate efforts to engage people of his community, and wean them away from the prevalent tide, to bring them to work with the Congress to attain the goal of Independence. His understanding of the pertinent issues marks him out to be not only an important Muslim voice in the Independence movement but also one of India's foremost political visionary of his time.

Index Terms—Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, historical figure, political, visionary, National, Movement, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Maulana Kalam Azad was born on 11th of November in an elite family of Afghan origin in the year 1888 in Mecca. Hardy (2018) writes that his family migrated to Calcutta, where he was brought up in a religious orthodox family, as his father, Maulana Khairuddin, was a theologian who was greatly respected (as cited in Shahabuddin, 2025). He grew up to study Arabic, Urdu, English and Persian languages, and was a respected Scholar of the Quran. He studied the thoughts of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and the doctrines espoused by Jamaluddin Afghani, among others. The Pan-Islamic ideas of Jamaluddin Afghani were closer to his line of thought, as in the later years, he became more critical of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's ideas. His travels abroad to Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan, Syria and Turkey, and his meetings with expatriate revolutionaries, especially luminaries like Saed Pasha and his exposure to the ethos of the young Turks had a deep impact on his political ideas.

The pivotal moment in his political journey was the British policy of the partition of Bengal in 1905, which was done along communal lines. He was critical of the Muslim leaders who had begun giving greater importance to communal issues. This led him to reject collaborative tendencies (with the British) of the Aligarh school, which to him seemed to support the British against the Hindus (Bhattacharjee, p.133). In the course of his political journey, he served not only as one of the youngest presidents of the Indian National Congress at the age of 35 in 1923, but he was also one of the longest serving presidents of the Congress (1940 -1946). His writings in the various journals, especially the *AL Hilal* and many of his speeches and correspondences as the President of the Indian National Congress, offer a wide canvas of his political views. His ideas of composite Nationalism, his role as a staunch freedom fighter, his understanding of Indian nationhood and rejection of communalism, and his aspiration for an Independent India marks him out to be one of the preeminent intellectuals and political visionary of his time.

II. MAULANA AZAD'S ROLE IN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Maulana Azad was an Islamic Scholar, who was brought up in an orthodox Muslim family. His travels abroad to France and some Islamic countries, along with the ground realities of India under British Imperialism, significantly influenced his political philosophy. According to Katadah and Arif (2024, p.211), "Azad" was the pen name chosen by him 'as a symbol of his mental liberation from a constrictive perspective on religion and life'. For someone of his background, his views on religion were

unconventional. He acknowledged the potential of religion to cause division (Jafri, 2017, p.2). He wrote a very nice laudatory essay on 'Sarmad', who had been put to death for his stance against orthodoxy and called him a holy Martyr (Jafri, 2017, p.2). His views on religion, culture and nationalism were affected by his political activism.

Maulana Azad's formative political stance was influenced by extremists like Shyamsundar Chakraborty and Aurobindo Ghosh, with whom he kept in touch during the Swadeshi movement in the years 1905-1908. His participation was instrumental in clearing doubts about the support of Muslim's for swadeshi to a great extent. He was also able to set up secret societies in different parts of North India with the aim of freeing India from colonial rule. He also encouraged young students to take part in revolutionary activities. His involvement in the Silk Conspiracy and his role in intensifying the revolutionary movement also caught the eye of the British. Shukla opines that it was his role in the Silk Conspiracy and his link with some of the leaders which led to him being externed from Bengal (Shukla, 2017, pp.12-13). Apart from this, he carried out anti-British as well as Pan-Islamist propaganda in *Al-Hilal* and *AL-Balagh*, wherein he criticised pro-colonial ideas of the Aligarh school modernism and the distortion of history by the colonist. Through these papers, he tried to encourage the Muslims to join the nationalist movement. *Al-Hilal* was looked upon with suspicion by the British, and publication stopped in 1914. In 1915, the press was confiscated which led him to start a weekly called *AL-Balagh*, which lasted for a short period of time. Meanwhile, in 1916, under the Defence Act, Provision 3A, he had to leave Bengal for Ranchi. He was released on 1 January 1920 (Rana, 2017, pp.21-22).

The year 1920 was a momentous year for Azad. He was able to meet Gandhi on the 18th of January, the same year. He began to bond with the Indian National Congress and became one of the most ardent supporters of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement. His role in the Congress was remarkable as he not only encouraged the Muslims to actively participate in the National movement, but he also served as one of the youngest Presidents of the Indian National Congress at the age of 35 in 1923, and one of the longest serving Congress Presidents from 1940 to 1946. It is through his various speeches as Congress president as well as

his communications, that one is able to arrive at a clear understanding of his political vision.

III. NATIONALISM, COMMUNALISM AND COMPOSITE CULTURE

Azad's understanding of India was holistic. According to him, many caravans of the human race, religion and culture had found a home in India's hospitable soil. He felt that like Ganga and Jamuna cultural currents flowed separate paths to finally arrive and be joined in Sangam. He states that he himself was '...a part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality' (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p 20). He said, "Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievements....There is indeed no aspect of our life which has escaped this stamp. Our languages were different, but we grew to use a common language; our manners and customs were dissimilar, but they acted and reacted on each other and thus produced a new synthesis" (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.21).

To lay a greater stress, he stated that he was a proud Indian who was '...a part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality...indispensible...an essential element which has gone to build India (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.20). For him, Hindu-Muslim unity was of utmost importance; therefore, he gave great importance to multi-religious cooperation, making him a proponent of inclusive and secular nationalism. He had been averse to the partition of Bengal and was very clear that he did not support the division of the nation on communal lines.

According to him, the Muslim's in India initially kept away from the freedom movement, as they had in 1888. This led him to think deeply on the matter and conclude that all Indians were like people in the same boat travelling together (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, pp.18-19). He stated that he started the *Al hilal* in 1912, and he said that there was a new phase of political awakening among the Muslims in the period

starting 1912 till 1918 (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.19).

His involvement in the Indian National Congress helped him have a bigger plank of persuading Muslims to come together with the Congress to participate in India's freedom struggle. Gandhi's support for the Khilafat movement, along with the non-cooperation movement, proved a broad base of cooperation. According to Mukherjee (2019), he sought '...to use the khilafat cause to strengthen Hindu-Muslim solidarity (as cited in Shahabuddin, 2025, p.60).

Azad, meanwhile, tried to unite the Hindus and Muslims by starting *Ummat -i- Wahidda* which meant one nation (Shukla, 2017, p.13). Apart from political activism, he also tried to use religious symbols. Shahabuddin writes "...his political writings often used Islamic symbols and history to rally Muslim audiences" (Shahabuddin, 2025, p.62).

Azad acknowledged that everyone was aware of the problem of communal tension, and he was of the view that everyone wanted a quick resolution. He stated that it was the duty of every Indian to help resolve the issue; however, the primary task at hand was the attainment of Independence (Maulana Azad denies linkage between Independence and internal problems. The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 20 February 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.2). He, in no uncertain terms, spelt out, 'The problem is there: to admit its existence, however, it does not mean that it should be used as a weapon against India's National Freedom. British Imperialism has always exploited it to this end' (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.13). He stated that the important issue before the country was political, while the Hindu – Muslim problem was a domestic issue which should not come in the way of the independence of India. He felt that internal problems could be resolved after Independence (Maulana Azad denies linkage between Independence and internal problems, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 20 February 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.1). Azad felt that both at home and in England effort was made to confuse the public, by raking up the communal question in order to avert attention from the important political issue of Independence by using the former issue to appear to be the real impediment to resolving

India's political problem (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.13). According to him, the Muslims should not look upon once own countrymen with distrust and they should join the congress in their Independence struggle. He felt that seeking safeguards from the British would result in buttressing the foundation of British imperialism in the country (Maulana Azad denies linkage between Independence and internal problems, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 20 February,1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.2).

He was aware of the insecurities within his community and said that it was not wrong to struggle for their safeguard but he said, "They should not look to the British government for these safeguards but they should look to their countrymen." Azad was of the view that British policy of 'divide and rule' was for the purpose of consolidating its own power, and he felt that 'A foreign government can never encourage internal unity in the subject country...disunity is the surest guarantee for the continuance of its own domination' (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, pp.2 &13).

Azad said that the British officers had conspired to prepare and use Muslims against the national awakening as 'prominence was given to two points', Muslims were fewer in number in comparison to the Hindus and with the introduction of democracy '...India would ...establish the rule of the Hindu majority. He further stated, 'We are told to put an end to our communal conflicts, but opportunity to do so is denied to us' (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, pp.16 &15).

Azad was aware that the British policy of divide and rule had affected the communal harmony of the nation. Therefore, he further cautioned that if suspicion was what guided one regarding the future, then he said one was '... forced to tolerate the existence of a third power'...he also felt this power was reluctant to withdraw, and the path of fear meant allowing the existence of the authorities already entrenched to continue. He felt that if one viewed the future with confidence, then one could move towards the goal of independence (Azad's historic Presidential Address at the 53rd Congress Session, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 2 March 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, pp 18-19).

Azad stressed Muslim's were an integral part of Indian identity and division of the country would not only geographically divide the country but also tear the shared culture. For him two- nation theory was politically erroneous (Shahabuddin, 2025, p.60). According to him, '.....Mr. Jinnah's two-nation theory was entirely based on misunderstanding and he did not agree with him' (Maulana Azad denies linkage between Independence and internal problems. The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 20 February, 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.2). He clearly stated, 'The league can present any scheme, but it cannot claim that the scheme is acceptable by the totality or even the majority of the Mussalmans' (Azad exposes folly of League Scheme for partition, The Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 23 April 1940, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.24). Azad called on '...the Muslims not to stand in the way of freedom by presenting different schemes (Azad's call to Muslim's to give precedence to attainment of Freedom, The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 24 March 1942, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p. 44). He held the Muslim League responsible for misguiding Indian Muslims and asked them to stop vacillating but 'enjoy the freedom of the country from foreign rule' (Shukla, 2017, p.19).

Despite his many efforts, the partition of India did take place. Azad was critical of the partition of India. In his book '*India Wins Freedom*', he writes that the partition could never bring unity but would result in conflicts. He predicted that it would eventually result in hostility between the two countries: India and Pakistan (Shahabuddin, 2025, pp.62).

His political vision did not just confine to the struggle for India's freedom but he also put forth his ideas of post-independence India.

IV. VISION OF FREE INDIA

Maulana Kalam Azad dreamt of a socialist India where the peasantry and the workers numbering in millions would have rights and food (Azad's vision of free India. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 17 April 1946, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p.134). He believed in democracy and advocated for the removal of illiteracy, equal educational opportunities, and sound primary education. For him, the democratisation of education was important as he emphasised education, which would help in character building, resulting in helping one realise one's potential. He was also optimistic that

education would contribute towards global citizenship (Sahu, 2017, pp.57-59).

V. AZAD ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Azad had spoken up in defence of the Ottoman Caliphate as he felt this was associated with colonial oppression in India. He also spelt out India's stance with regard to the issues plaguing the world during the Second World War. It was communicated, 'India has condemned Fascism and Nazism, but she condemns imperialism equally' (Azad Asks Britain to spell out war Aims, as cited in Chopra, 1990, p. 22). In the same message, he clearly talks of the desire of the human souls for a new world order which was based on 'reason, justice and peace' (Chopra, 1990, p.23). Further, he also indicated that India, after independence, was to have a treaty relation with Britain as independent Equal partners and the treaty should be beneficial to both countries.

VI. CONCLUSION

India has produced many great thinkers and political activists, and among them, Maulana Kalam Azad stands as one of the taller figures. Despite his early upbringing in a traditional Muslim household, his exposure to the different ideas and movements across the globe helped him formulate his own understanding of the political problems that plagued India. From links with the extremists in his early period of political activism, he later became one of the more ardent supporters of the non-violent movement advocated by Gandhiji. His political career was honed during the freedom struggle and this led to his emergence as the youngest and the longest serving president of the Indian National Congress. He was an ardent advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, the loss of which he warned would be a loss to humanity. He was an anti-imperialist to the core, and his ideas on the freedom struggle, the nature of British Imperialism, and the fears he expressed about the partition of India shows his deep understanding of the political realities that existed in his time, and thereafter. His views on nationalism, composite culture, Indian nationhood and his frequent call for unity in the face of British policy of 'Divide and Rule' makes him truly one of India's greatest political Visionary of his time.

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