



Review Paper

Ideas of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: An Overview

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Abstract

The present paper deals with a comprehensive study on the thoughts and contributions of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in pre and post independent India. His contribution has far reaching effects. He not only had served as an important member in the constituent assembly formed to make draft constitution for free India but also served as the first education minister in Pundit Nehru's cabinet till his death. This study has also tried to emphasise the role of Azad as a leader came from numerically less community of South Asia who not only stood against Jinnah's "two nation theory" and League's Pakistan demand but also stood for a constant dialogue between the minority and majority section of the people and served as a bridge for united, secular and composite nationalistic endeavour for independent India.

Key words: Maulana Azad, nationalism, unity of religion, pluralism, composite culture.

Introduction

Mohiuddin Ahmad, as he was named, was born in Mecca in 1888, better known as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, is, by any reckoning, a major figure in twentieth century India's eventful political history and was one of the few nationalist leaders who stood out among a galaxy of leaders on account of his intellectual proficiency and deep commitment to the saga of nationalist political process in India. A very few individuals show the audacity and have the nerve to criticize their own minds and to fight a battle against their own prejudice, he stands out extremely exceptional. Azad was a man of constant introspection and critical self-examination, though he was a great scholar thoroughly trained in the Islamic epistemologies, with great intellectual abilities and eloquence of pen and speeches.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad is a man on the move, unencumbered by the legacy of the past, his eyes set on India's future which was to be fashioned on the principle of 'wahadat-e-din' or multi-religious co-operation and harmony. This was reflected in his unfinished '*Tarjuman al-Quran*',¹ the work of creative genius, and easily the most profound statement on how diverse religious-cultural traditions can co-exist in a composite, plural society that was in the making in twentieth century India; in '*Ghubar-e-Khatir*',² a comparatively subdued but eloquent expression of his feelings, urges and aspirations, in the 'Ramgarh address' which was a powerful political statement, neat in the exposition of ideas and brilliant in its advocacy of secular nationalism.³ A man who was once described by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru in his tribute in the Indian Parliament as India's '*Amir-e Karawaan*'⁴ with 'an astonishing memory' and 'encyclopaedic' information,⁵ by abandoning his individual enterprises, such as '*Jamiyat-i Hizbullah*',⁶ he placed himself at the centre of the nationalist movement. His identity was thus defined in the larger context of an epic struggle; his stature enhanced by his identification with national rather than communitarian concerns.⁷

Azad, is a great patriot, an astute politician, an incisive thinker, an charismatic orator, profound scholar of Islam, an erudite and the finest classic theologians in Islam, an inborn flair for literary writing, an ardent freedom fighter, a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, a front rank personality of the Indian National Congress, one of the architects of modern secular India, a closest associate of the first India's cabinet ministry under the leadership of Pundit Nehru. As a compendium of the leader of contemporary India, summarized his leadership saying 'Maulana Azad', is not a man but a technique.

It has been greatly acknowledged that 'the celerity of thoughts' and 'the capacity to make a balanced and rational assessment of the contextual situation' reflects his inborn leadership qualities for the expansion of India's democratic fabric and replicate it in the shaping the destiny of the newly liberated state like India. A leader is defined as a person who knows the way, who shows the way and who goes the way; Azad was one of those who went the way carrying his people with him and thus obtained a legendary fame in his lifetime itself, a feat earned by only a few statesmen.

This paper seeks to explore that the humanistic, progressive, non-communal, and pluralistic ideals of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad are as relevant today as they were years ago. In an age when the contours of Third World's cultural, social and political lives in general and India is particular are being moulded by the global consequences with greater intensity, and in response of all these the people of these countries is in search of a new opportunities, with aspiring for a future free from extremism, communalism, exploitation and injustice. Thanks to his liberated attitude and pluralistic wisdom, Azad challenged the communalist and extremist

forces and stood fast for the cause of peaceful coexistence and inter-communal harmony which remained his most desired aspiration throughout his life. He is best remembered in retrospectively constructed statist narratives as a “secular nationalist”, who served as education minister in Jawaharlal Nehru’s post-independence cabinet. Yet, in the present day scenario his thoughts and ideas perhaps the best answer all these unsolved questions. Therefore, in this broad background, Azad’s place in Indian politics can be judged through the following heads:

Ideological Discourse of Maulana Azad

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad a magnificent and exceptional combination of an incomparable scholar, a genuine intellectual, a sound Islamic theoretician, a visionary leader, and a pragmatic statesman of India in particular and South Asia in general. Separated as he was from his contemporary leadership, there is hardly any parallel to his multidimensional personality and intellect. Leading the national freedom movement during the most critical times of our history, he fought against the British imperialism in his own creative ways which was never compare with any other of his time span.

He believed in the peaceful coexistence of diverse faiths. His impact on our political and religious life has been enormous. He remained an authentic voice for the pluralistic society of the subcontinent and stood for its “*composite wisdom, its heritage of eclecticism and its mutual respect for the religious practices and faiths of others*”⁸. Throughout his life he struggled in the domains of religion and politics, calling his co-religionists and the people of other faiths, and his countrymen to his most cherished dream of a composite India, an India that would set an example of new humanism for the rest of the world.

It is important to note that his every belief and conviction was the result of his emancipated mind. He scrutinized every concept in the light of reason and wisdom. The most integral part of his contemplation was from his deep understanding of the Holy Quran. He believed that “*God’s bounty did not discriminate between one individual and another and was necessary for man to emulate Divine ways in establishing contact with human beings*” (Ibid). Therefore, his views and thoughts can be seen in the light of the holy text of Quran.

In searching of Azad’s ideological discourses as one may easily traced back his essay on “*Sarmad Shaheed*” (1910). When Azad was in his very tender age he wrote this essay to explore the meaning of true religious teaching of Islam through portraying Sarmad’s life. The philosophical premise of the essay is based in the famous Sufi theme, Hama Oust. The essay creates a striking parallel to the non-communal and deep humanism of Maulana Azad. Commenting in this very point Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma said “*the importance of His message of humanity has become more relevant with every passing phase in our history. The path charted by their life and work is a mishal-e-raah (a guiding taper) for us today*”. As a commentator of the Holy Quran, Azad explored the most eclectic message of the Quran. As Maulana Azad telling us through this essay that since Dara Shikoh, in contrast to Alamgir Aurangzeb, was a symbol of the composite India and a great supporter of humanism so he had a clear inclination towards Sarmad so after executing Darah, Aurangzeb had no patience for Sarmad.¹⁰ Here Maulana Azad shows how religion was exploited for the political objectives:

“In Alamgir’s eyes, Sarmad’s greatest crime was his closeness to Dara Shikoh. He needed an excuse for ordering his execution. In Asia, politics has always used religion to camouflage its designs. Many political sentences were given the guise of religious heresies”.¹¹ Azad reads the execution of Sarmad by the court of Alamgir Aurangzeb in a historical perspective. He exposes the tyranny and oppression of the court and its use of religion as a weapon to cut the throats of the opponents and he writes:

“During the 1300 years, since the advent of Islam, the instrument of the fatwa (religious decree) has been a sword without sheath. The blood of thousands of believers in truth is the testimony to its cutting edge. During any given period of Islamic history, there are examples of kings who made equal use of both the pen of the Qazi (judge) and the sword of the General in bleeding to death whosoever threatened their supremacy. Blood games were not only restricted to the Sufis and patriots. Whoever dared to come close to the mysteries of reality and managed to read the intricacies of the Divine Design was pounced upon by the custodians of the fiqh (Islamic Law). Sarmad was executed by the same sword”.¹²

Thus, it is important to note in this very context that during the period from 1910 to 1920, Azad tried to awake his co-religionists from their deep slumber. In 1912 when he started publishing *Al-Hilal*, he was very clear about its aim and objectives. Through his paper he was trying to bring his co-religionists on one page. Here like elsewhere he expressed the original and progressive views on both politics and religion. According to Radhakrishnan, “*even before he joined the Congress in 1920, he was a revolutionary*”.¹³ during this period Azad wanted to bring the Muslims of India into the mainstream national struggle for freedom and awakened anti-colonial feelings throughout in India. The task of awakening his co-religionists that Gandhi was yet to do after a decade, he had already done that before 1920.¹⁴

Maulana Azad and His ‘Pen’ and ‘Paper’ Politics:

Azad was a very unconventional type of politician in his own calibre. He started his journey in the fields of politics with the words of his pen and the several articles published in his ‘*Al-Hilal*’ and ‘*Al-Balagh*’. The primary goal of this magazine “*was to launch a vigorous attack not only on the colonial distortions of our history but more on the pro-colonial modernism of the Aligarh school, which had poisoned the minds of the modernist Muslim intelligentsia. ‘Al-Hilal’ held out the message of nationalism to the Muslim elites as well as popular classes and urged them to join other communities in the struggle for the liberation of the country*”. The primary goal of this magazine “*was to launch a vigorous attack not only on the colonial distortions of our history*

but more on the pro-colonial modernism of the Aligarh school, which had poisoned the minds of the modernist Muslim intelligentsia. 'Al-Hilal' held out the message of nationalism to the Muslim elites as well as popular classes and urged them to join other communities in the struggle for the liberation of the country".¹⁵

Thus, the best the result of this period positively came into Maulana Azad's commentary on the Quran' as 'Tarjuman al-Quran', the work of creative genius, and the most profound statement on how diverse religious and cultural traditions can co-exist in a composite, plural society like India. In this work his concept religious pluralism is articulated strongly by the idea of "*Wahdat-I Din*" that is oneness of faiths. To Azad all fragmentations and divisions of humanity in colour, race and religion are transcended by God as nourisher and admirer and the right path of Him copes with no definite religious community. Thus, Maulana pencilled in an equivalent between the two ideas that are Sufi concept of 'unity of existence' and the concept of 'pantheism' as expressed in Upanishads. It reflects his ideas of Hindu – Muslim cooperation much broader canvas and which later on becomes the driving force of Maulana's thoughts and actions.¹⁶

Maulana Azad as Statesman

As a born writer, journalist and intellectual Azad believed in frankness and were forthright. So far as question of his belief in non-violence is concerned this statesman was followers of Gandhism. According to Maulana "*I, like Mahatma Gandhi, also believe that to retaliate with violence is no answer to violence, which is in contradiction to the natural principles. In this regard I fully endorse the views of Gandhiji and want independence of the country only through the means being preached by him*".¹⁷ He had strong belief that only through the communal harmony in the independence could be achieved and balanced only by shared compassionate of devotees of all faiths for the nation-building. For this he urged, "*If India renounces the policy of amity between Hindus and Muslim, he shall withdraw his demand for independent, but shall never cease to work for Hindu-Muslim amity. Because delay in the attainment of independence may not cause any harm, to India but our disunity will certainly cause immense harm to mankind*".¹⁸

Due to this he strongly stood against the separation of the country on the basis of religion as because he thought this type of partition would unfavourably distress all the citizens of India in the coming days with precarious cost. Azad fully agreed that in the way of communal harmony the role of British Government was the great obstruction till they are in the country. In many times he had repeated, "*British Government cannot absolve itself of the communal problem of the existing here*".¹⁹

Maulana Azad as President of Indian National Congress

Azad's engagement with national politics is the most active part of his public life in British India. Azad, when he became president of the Indian National Congress for the first time in 1923, had to obviously carry his idea of Hindu-Muslim cooperation in very bold tune. In his presidential address he said, "*If an angel descends from the heaven today and proclaims from Qutub Minar that India can attain Swaraj within 24 hours provided I relinquish my demand of Hindu-Muslim unity, I shall resort to it. No my friend, I shall give up Swaraj but not Hindu-Muslim unity, for if Swaraj is delayed, that it be a loss of India, but, if Hindu-Muslim unity is lost, it will be a loss for the whole mankind*".²⁰ Actually, "*the 1923 session was important because it was held in the backdrop of growing Hindu-Muslim conflicts*"²¹ and one can easily recognized how his words drives "*India to adhere to secular nationalism and reject religion-based nationalism. It also indicates the future foreign policy of free India that focussed itself on peace, coexistence and equality of all nations*".²²

When British Government introduced Government India Act, 1935 and accordingly announced 1937 elections for provinces Azad's role in this context more significant, as because he not only negotiates political arrangement for government formation in several provinces but at the same time, strived in his best to defuse the communalist mentality of his fellow countrymen and weakening the pro-Raj forces for the betterment of Indian national prospect.²³

The pragmatic attitude with bold statesmanship once more showed by Maulana Azad through his active participation in the later political process, specifically in the context of communal dissection and faction ridden party organisation of Congress. Which enable him a natural contender for presiding over the Ramgarh session of Indian National Congress in 1940. Indeed, "*his Ramgarh speech – perhaps the most eloquent exposition of Indian nationalism ever made from a Congress platform – was a reaffirmation of his secular vision and a powerful rebuttal of the two-nation theory*".²⁴ It is noted that "since the very inception of his political career, Azad believed that in the plurality of the Indian situation no particular religion could be the basis for nationalism in India, thereby indicating the way towards a sort of secular identity of Indian nationality with the patent idea that, having no religion of its own, it treated all religions at par and did not differentiate their adherents on the basis of religion and culture."²⁵

Maulana Azad as Organiser

In the time of down in the dumps condition of the Congress organisation Maulana Azad as we know was elected as the President of All India Congress for the two times, i.e. in 1923 and 1942. In these times he did the remarkable job by cementing the splits. As his organisational ability Azad focused on discipline. He gave suggestion to Pt. Nehru to preserve total discipline at the time of Cripps Plan. Similarly, "*Rajaji, against the decision of the Congress Working Committee, moved a motion in the Madras Legislative Assembly for the acceptance of the Plan. Maulana immediately took the disciplinary actions in the matter and consequently Rajaji had to resign from the Executive Committee*".²⁶ During the time of Salt movement Azad as an Acting President of the Congress took the errands for the success of the movements when the other leaders behinds the bar. Secondly, he highlights on his farm determined outlook which reflected in his advice to the Indian Muslims to contribute in the freedom movements with full of

willpower and that if they did not do so, history would not pardon them. *"Furthermore, Muslims are not born for disappointment. Their sole aim is optimism coupled with determination. Because of Maulana's determined outlook and firm call to his co-religionist, Muslims whole heartedly participated in 'Non-Cooperation Movement, 'Khilafat Movement' and all other movements in thereafter"*.²⁷

Thirdly, as the organiser Maulana Azad had strongly urged for democracy and its principles as the gift of God. When he had come to know about Gandhiji's decision regarding the position of Rajaji in the time of Cabinet Mission Plan he criticise him as because it was totally undemocratic that he stooped Rajaji for coming to Delhi as because *"if Rajaji came to Delhi he would certainly meet the members of the Plan and repeat his formula of Partition"*.²⁸ Then *"He immediately wrote to Rajaji giving him permission to come and go anywhere unhesitatingly"*.²⁹ Maulana mentioned "Liberty one's birth right and none can enslave the other, therefore, we should have complete faith in democracy and if we do not do so we, violate rules of God".³⁰

Last but not in the list, Maulana was strong believer of secularism. *"He believed that all religions have their origin in, One and their ultimate goal is also, one i.e. God. As a result of this belief Maulana in 1946 got representation for all religious equally under Congress quota in Viceroy's Cabinet –Working Committee . . . for this sole reason Maulana continued as the lone President for a long time in the history of Congress"*.³¹

Maulana Azad's view on Economic Equality and Self-Government

Maulana highlights on the main importance to economic equality as the base of self- government. To him, *"Self-Government is meaningless, till the gap between haves and have-nots is bridged"*.³² He as a great leader liked to see their people self-reliant due to their economic advancement. Azad believed in economic equality with unorthodox views. As *"Maulana was also a socialist and was a firm believer in the principles of equality preached by Islam"*.³³

Maulana Azad on Cosmopolitanism

As a philosopher per-excellence though he cared for whole society similarly he had strong belief in Cosmopolitanism. *"Maulana's shrilly voice always condemned violations of human values (i.e. inhuman behaviour) anywhere, on any part of the Globe"*.³⁴ He discard moan over the diabolical trials of World War – II and mentioned, *"Nations after nations are being forced into the furnace of war. Is it not required of us to enquire our conscience before participating into this act of total annihilation of mankind, as to why at all it is so happening and what, destiny has in store for us."*³⁵ Azad treated every human creature as equal and had always worried that the interest of the marginal sections of the people should be taken care of by the majority. *"Maulana did not accept that a particular place belongs to a particular community or religion because he believed that the Supreme Being, who creates rules the Universe, is one i.e. God and everything is under His control and power. Thus, Maulana's cosmopolitanism is harmonised with his spiritual thinking and symbolises equality of whole mankind."*³⁶ He favoured the development of a country by amalgamating development and Gandhism. *"Maulana was a philosopher and there-fore wanted to mould the education and policies of the country into socialist pattern."*³⁷

Maulana Azad as an Educationist

After Independence, the role played by Azad is an extension of his role he played in pre-independence India. Truly, *" . . . Azad played a significant role as Education Minister, presiding over this vitally important ministry in the last twelve years of his life he laid the foundations of a system of education that helped Pt. Nehru to create a modern scientific infrastructure that has eminently served as foundation for the political and industrial superstructure . . . "*.³⁸ of the Country.

Azad was basically an educator, *"when he wanted to join the revolutionaries of Anushilan Samiti he educated its leaders not to shun the Muslims. Later, as editor of Al-Hilal, he tried to educate the Muslim community to participate in struggle for national independence. His affidavit in the court of Calcutta's Presidency Magistrate was appreciated by Mahatma Gandhi as the best education in the principles of Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience. His presidential addresses to Congress sessions are recognised as basic documents for understanding the basis of common nationhood and common culture of India"*.³⁹

It is needlessly to say that, he well knew that the *'disease of narrow- mindedness'*, as he described it, which essentially erased away through the inclusion of educational efforts. For the *'development of national mind'*, Maulana, however, recover gaps in together in the *'colonial-modern'* and the *'native-conventional'* systems and attempt to evolve an alternative which integrated the elements of both western and conventional, emancipating the former from its colonial substance and as well as its ideological representations, and the latter from its unscientific and irrational stance.⁴⁰

Hence, Abul Kalam Azad expressed that for achieving real essence of education the future Indian educational policy must be synthesized both the essence of Eastern and Western values of educational aim and objectives. According to him, it is absolutely needless to create *'myth of conflict between East and West'* and accordingly, he spoke in terms of a common cultural heritage of *'world citizenship'*.⁴¹ Thus, his synthesised attitude and coordinating outlook helped him to solve the language problem in matters of education.

According to Maulana the finest tool and comprehensive mechanism for nation building is educational apparatus in post-colonial state like India. It was *"reflected in the various institutions that he build as Education Minister. In 1948 he set up the University Grants Commission to streamline higher education and, four years later the Secondary Education Commission to see that they turn*

out their students to play a constructive role in life. All India Council for Technical Education, Kharagpur Institute of Higher Technology, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and Indian Council of Agricultural Research are his initiatives in putting nation's economic life on scientific lines. Similarly he set up Sahitya Academy, Lalit Kala Academy and Indian Council for Cultural Relations which stand as evidence of his interests in development of cultural life and establishing relations with other countries of the world'.⁴² Indeed, his great achievements in the field of education between 1947 to 1958, shall be remembered by generations to come.

Conclusion

By way to conclude our discussion we may say that Maulana Azad presence a unique example of versatile personality which mostly is observed during his public life but the cause of peaceful coexistence and inter-communal harmony remains his most desired aspiration throughout his life and he never stop to preaching this ideal. He has served twice in Congress as President in the time of the turbulent period of our pre-independent political history. Azad represented the Congress in the Simla Conference held to discuss transfer of power in the hands of Indians by the British and played a leading part in the negotiations with the Cabinet Mission. Not only he has filled up the gaps between Congress factionalism but at the same time he stood against Jinnah's "Two Nation Theory" and League's Pakistan demand but also stood for a constant dialogue between the minority and majority section of the people and served as a bridge for united, secular and composite nationalistic endeavour for independent India.

Note & References

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27. Ibid. 4.
28. Ibid. 5.
29. Ibid.

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