

Activism of the Puritans: The Politics of Majlis-i-Ahrar

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Right from the outset, Pakistan was taken hostage by a particularistic style of historical discourse that is not only one dimensional but also monolithic and monocausal. The viewpoint that assumed centrality in Pakistani historiography emanates from the ideological framework that is absolutely Muslim League specific. In such a political scenario, the dissenting movements and parties like Khudai Khidmatgar Movement in N.W.F.P., Jeeya Sindh in Sindh, Awami League in East Bengal and Unionists and Ahrar in the Punjab hardly had any space to operate, or the ideals they adhered found enough accommodation. All of them were hurled to the peripheries after Pakistan came into existence while the Muslim League emerged as the sole champion of the freedom movement. In a bid to consign all such parties with anti-colonial posture to the position of utter marginality, postcolonial state also denounced them as traitors of Islam and Pakistan. The reason for doing so was straight and simple: the ruling elite of newly found state was mostly the remnants of colonial era and their interests could be in jeopardy if such organizations were allowed to enter the mainstream of Pakistani politics. Ruling out the possibility of any alternative voice in the realm of political history, the dominant discourse created very many silent spaces that subsequently came to be an established feature of the Pakistani state. The books of the two most prominent historians of Pakistan, Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi and Sheikh Muhammad Ikram exemplify such ‘silences’, setting a historiographical trend for the later generation to follow. History textbooks seemed to have accepted quite gratefully, the legacy of ostracism directed towards the voices, not subscribing to the dominant political discourse.

The ruling elite’s sensitivity towards parties with explicitly anti-colonial stance can better be understood in the context of a statist

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paradigm in which 'the Hindu' instead of the colonial state forms the 'other'. Although anti-colonial sentiments did resonate in the policy statements issued by Pakistan government in the early days, things however changed as time rolled by and Hindus were demonized as the inveterate enemies of Pakistan to the benefit of British colonialism's legatees. Consequently, the colonial and postcolonial discourses could not secure any space in the Pakistani epistemic regime simply because colonial state with all its fall out ceases to exist as the 'other'. The political groups mentioned above ventured to oppose the colonial state and had liaison with Indian National Congress barely survived on the margins of Pakistani polity. One such political group was Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam which had its origin in Khilafat Movement (1918-1924). All the individuals who constituted Ahrar were exponents of the Khilafat Movement in the Punjab during 1920s. Founding fathers of the Ahrar epitomized the roaring voice of protest and agitation against the British and pro-British forces. Explication of that dimension is the fundamental question that would be addressed in this paper.

The time Khilafat Movement was about to end it divided into various factions, Ahrar was one of them. This period marks the beginning of our study. After referring to Ahrar's core ideology of *Hakumat-i-Illahia*, the exhaustive study of the movements with agitation and violence as their salience would be the main thrust of the paper.

Khilafat Movement gradually fizzled out by mid 1920s after failing to achieve its avidly cherished aim, the restoration of the institution of Khilafat in Turkey. The movement became an exercise in sheer vacuity when Kamal Atatürk himself dealt a death knell to it by abolishing the institution of the Khilafat in 1924, leaving Indian Muslims in a state of utter despair and despondency. However, the movement's inability to achieve its lofty idol does not mean the whole act of rising up to defend Khilafat was just a misfired enthusiasm gone astray. Failed though it was, its contribution in the Muslim politics of South Asia can hardly be spurned. Just after its eruption Jamiat-ul-ulama-i-Hind was brought into existence in 1919 by few venerated religious scholars, Abul Kalam Azad, Mahmood Hassan of Farangi Mahal, Abdul Bari and Hussain Ahmad Madni to quote a few.

The point that needs to be emphasized here is about Ulema-i-Deoband being the principal motivating force who was in the vanguard of the movement. However they were not the only people striving for the sustenance of Khilafat. Modernist Muslim section spearheaded by Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, mostly referred as Ali brothers also had its representation in the movement. Former (traditionalist section who drew its inspiration from Deoband) and latter (modernist, educated at

such institutions like Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh, known for the western brand of education) had consensus on the restoration of the institution of Khilafat. Although such liberals like Muhammad Ali Jinnah nonchalantly distanced himself from the whole affair, which to him was nothing but ‘adventure in altruism.’ Subsequently, as the movement gathered momentum traditionalists and modernists demonstrated mutual understanding and unity. However, things were not as smooth as they appeared on the surface. Schism between the two was not bridged permanently though great spectacles of inter-communal as well as inter-sectional unity were witnessed during the course of Khilafat Movement. The circumstances unfolding in the succeeding years brought forth all the contradictions, inherent in the movement. Not only Hindu-Muslim rapprochement but traditionalist-modernist accommodation vanished into the thin air. Traditionalist-modernist cleavage, later on became the main cause for a handful people taking a separate course. Hence, Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam came into existence. The dynamics of all its necessary details are discussed in the coming pages.

Khilafat Movement effected many changes in the political perception of the Indian Muslims (specifically it had greater impact on North Indian Muslims), many of them were very positive. Khilafat Movement also provided an entry point to the Muslims coming from lower echelons of the Muslim social formation, which ofcourse was its abiding contribution in the realm of politics. Muslim crafts men and the weavers (*julahas*)¹ in particular, and some sections of the Muslim salaried from North India lent an unequivocal support to Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind that provided an added impetus to the Khilafat Movement. Why did Muslim craftsmen become vociferous supporters of Jamiat does not fall within the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that it can best be understood in the backdrop of tradition-modernity dialectics. Simplistically put, it was a protest of displaced manual workers in the wake of machine culture brought in by the colonial regime. That protest found a proper forum in the form of Jamiat in the days of Khilafat Movement. Therefore, politics no longer remained the sole prerogative of the Muslim elite. Hitherto, marginalized sections of the community ultimately found a *niche* in the political arena. Gradually this ‘politics from below’ had a spill over affect on the regions like Punjab. Few religious zealots, motivated by Khilafat Movement and the idol of

¹ For the details about *julahas* role in politics see Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.66-108.

nationalism major protagonist of whom was none other than Indian National Congress, constituted an organization of their own by the name of Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam. As Shorish Kashmiri says, 'Undoubtedly Ahrars were the outcome of Khilafat Movement, ideas of *Al Hilal* and the pen of *Zamindar* put together. It was a combination of Anti-British outlook, Love for Islam, Patriotism, hatred from Capitalism, enmity with superstition, love for sacrifice...Ambition to bring about revolution and enthusiasm for conducting *jihad*.' ² Ahrar (as usually referred to, originally it is a plural form of an Arabic word, *hur* or *har*; which means become or be free, be born as a freeman) was established in 1929 with the avowed aim of creating an Islamic state within the subcontinent. However, lot of ambiguity shrouds the real dynamics of its establishment. Ahrar's devotion to Jamiat-ul-ulma-i-Hind was beyond any doubt, similarly it acquiesced in its general political overtone with Indian National Congress. The deference that the Ahraris held the Congress leadership in is a clear allusion to that fact. Nevertheless, 1929 onwards, it emphasized on its distinctive character, differing therefore with the Congress, seemingly on peripheral issues like separate electorate etc. What were, then, the factors, which persuaded Ahrar leadership to have a different organizational set up? The complexity of the issue is reflected in Syed Ata Ullah Shah Bokhari's quotation in a few Ahrari texts that Abul Kalam Azad asked him to set up Majlis-i-Ahrar though Azad himself did not relinquish his position as a top Muslim leader of Congress, and joined the organization set up at his behest. This calls for a thorough appraisal of the political scenario obtaining at all India level and also in the Punjab in the 1920s.

I

Though Khilafat Movement could not sustain itself beyond 1924 but even before it eventually tapered off, Gandhi's decision of terminating the movement just after Chauri Chaura incident in 1922 had already taken quite a bit of wind out of its sails. The time when Chauri Chaura incident took place, Khilafat/Non-Cooperation Movement was in full swing and a large number of the Muslim protagonists of Khilafat Movement were behind the bars. Therefore Gandhi's decision could neither be revoked nor reversed. Therefore, the movement suffered a setback too grave to be undone later. That factor although played a significant role in the movement's ultimate demise but the fatal blow came from the Khilafat leadership itself. The embezzlement to the tune

² Shoresh Kashmiri, *Bou-e-Gul, Nala-e-Dil, Dood-e-Charach-e-Mahfil* (Lahore: Chattan, 1972), p.310.

of Rs.1.6 million in the Khilafat fund resulted in the erosion of trust that millions of Muslims had reposed in the leadership. It contributed significantly in undermining the movement which at one time had exhibited the potential of rocking the colonial state to the core. Seth Chotani a timber businessman from Bombay was the President of Central Khilafat Committee and in-charge of the exchequer. Gail Minault holds him accountable for the mismanagement of the fund, as he did not maintain a separate account of the sum, collected in the name of Khilafat Movement. She says:

The fact remained, however, that there were enormous discrepancies in the accounts, and the balance of sixteen lakhs supposedly in the keeping of Seth Chotani and his son had vanished. In trying to straighten out the mess, the Khilafat Committee split right down the middle. On the one side were Chotanis, president and treasure, the present group of secretaries, and the paid employees of the Central Committee in Bombay. On the other was the rest of the Working Committee including Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. Ansari.³

Besides, Chotani and his son who invoked lot of criticism on that account, Muhammad Ali Jauhar and Shaukat Ali (Ali brothers) also took some of the blame. The enquiry committee set up for investigating the matter held them equally responsible for the mismanagement of the fund. That particular committee headed by Maulana Abdul Qadir Qasuri comprised all Punjabi members branded as loyalist to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. As Maulana Muhammad Ali harboured suspicion and ill will for the committee, pegged as Punjabi Khilafat Committee, hence on his behest Central Khilafat Committee declared it renegade. So ostracized by the Central Khilafat leadership, the defunct Punjabi Khilafat Committee could not hold itself together and got divided into two factions namely Muslim Nationalist Party under the leadership of Muhammad Alam which could not keep its distinct character for long and subsequently submerged into Congress, and Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam. The eminent persons like Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, Maulana Daud Ghaznavi, Syed Ata ullah Bokhari, Chaudhri Afzal Haq, Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar, Khawja Abdul Rehman Ghazi Sheikh Hassam-ud-Din and Maulana Habib ur Rehman Ludhianvi constituted the core leadership of Ahrar. Afzal Haq observes the split in the Punjab Committee as,

³ Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1982), p.190.

Punjab Khilafat Committee that was the soul of Central Body, unintentionally and unconsciously had two distinct factions in itself. Khilafat Punjab had an elite faction and the downtrodden faction. The elite... had been sluggish and ease loving. All the laborious work was the fate of the latter. The elite were conscience of their distinctness as a class whereas the downtrodden had no such realization. They thought of themselves as a part of the totality.... When Majlis-i-Khilafat Punjab severed its link with Central body, the elite formed its organization by the name of Muslim Nationalist Party and the downtrodden constituted Majlis-i-Ahrar.⁴

These lines elucidate Afzal Haq's thinking pattern that had tangible Marxist content in it. Afzal Haq's views hold tremendous significance because he, as Razi Wasti contends, was 'the brain of Ahrar Party' or *Mufakir-i-Ahrar*, as he was widely known. He created a lot of stir among the Muslim *ulema* by writing a pamphlet *Islam mein Umara Ka Wajud Nahin* (There is no existence of rich in Islam). Iftikhar Malik also holds the same view that Ahrar imbibed the 'impact of the October Revolution in Russia (1917) and the communist ideas that it had disseminated.' In 1931, addressing the annual meeting of Ahrar, Sahibzada Faiz ul Hassan enunciated socialism not at all different from the Islamic concept of *musawat* :

The unjust distribution of production is the real root-cause of all maladies and social injustice. To control it properly will be the actual cure of a big problem faced by human beings. Such control can be called *musawat* (equality), too. Socialism is an ideology brought out after a thorough research, and to me, is better than Capitalism, Fascism and other contemporary ideologies.⁵

However, it would be a mistake if Ahrar were posited only as a revolutionary political party inspired by Russian Revolution and Communist ideology. Ahrar's leadership's revolutionary posture notwithstanding, its religious zeal and conviction was unflinching. However Ahrari leaders betrayed their fondness for communist ideology probably because except Sheikh Hassam-ud Din all of them hailed from a very humble economic background. Therefore, it 'represented chiefly

⁴ Afzal Haq, *Tariekh-e-Ahrar* (Lahore: Makaba Majlis-e-Ahrar Islam, 1968), p.70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.09., Also see Iftikhar Haider Malik, *Sikandar Hayat Khan: A Political Biography* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1985), p.55.

the lower middle class element' quite conversely however Hamza Alvi regards Muslim salariat as Ahrar's main source of strength. "Its main assets were the devotion and zeal of its members and the eloquence of its leaders. Some of them could cast spell bound influence upon their audience. In spite of lack of material resources the Ahrars, within a short period, became one of the strongest political parties in the Punjab."⁶

While reverting to the question of Ahrar's emergence as an independent political entity, Jawaharlal Nehru's view seems worthy of attention. Nehru while describing the election of All India Congress Committee at Karachi in 1931 says:

Some Muslim members of the A.I.C.C. objected to this election, in particular to one (Muslim) name in it. Perhaps they also felt slighted because no one of their group had been chosen. In an all-India committee of fifteen it was manifestly impossible to have all interests represented, and the real dispute, about which we knew nothing, was an entirely personal and local one in the Punjab. The result was that the protestant group gradually drifted away from the Congress in the Punjab, and joined others in an 'Ahrar Party' or 'Majlis-e-Ahrar'.⁷

That observation evoked an incisive response from Afzal Haq. He assailed Nehru's statement pertaining to the class that Ahrar, supposedly, had hailed from. Nehru's calling Ahrar, the representative of lower middle class, in Afzal Haq's opinion amounted to an insolence perpetrated by a rich bourgeoisie socialist leader. He narrated the details of the 'election' more exhaustively and differently too. In fact Dr. Muhammad Alam was nominated at the All India Congress Committee at the recommendation of Maulana Azad and Maulana Abdul Qadir Qasuri. That nomination caused a stir among the people gathered in the *pandal* and particularly some voices of dissent were raised from amongst the members of the working committee. So, the raucous followed suit that was perceived to be engineered by Afzal Haq though he refused and clarified his position by saying, 'with all honesty I declare that I came to know about Dr. Sahib's nomination when Gandhiji made the announcement.'⁸

However, Nehru was not all that wrong in his observation; the nomination of Muhammad Alam at the A.I.C.C was one of the causes

⁶ An interview with Hamza Alvi at Lahore in 2004.

⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1936), p.269.

⁸ Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *Mufaker-e-Ahrar: Chaudhary Afzal Haq* (Lahore: Basat-Adab, 1991), p.159.

dissuading the members of the erstwhile Punjab Khilafat Committee from All India Congress Committee. Not gainsaying the fact that Ahrar had been constituted in 1929, two years earlier than Karachi session of A.I.C.C. and its leadership did not sever its allegiance with Congress. When Gandhi gave a call for civil disobedience, Ahrar leadership had participated in it with full enthusiasm. Consequently many including Afzal Haq were incarcerated. Subsequently after the conclusion of Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931, Ahrar alongwith all other political prisoners were released. The final break with All India Congress eventually came about in 1931. A renowned Ahrari Abu Yusuf Qasimi while drawing on Afzal Haq's narrative 'Tarikh i Ahrar' sheds light on the break up:

The foremost reason for the 'parting of the ways' between Congress and Ahrar was the issue of electorate. Punjab Khilafat Committee, right from the very beginning was in favour of separate electorate, weak center with federal form of Government ensuring complete autonomy to the provinces. Nehru Report proposed adult franchise in its recommendation for Indian Constitution therefore Punjab Khilafat Committee found that provision quite consistent with the interests of Punjab Muslims. Therefore, it acceded to the joint electorate.⁹

Nehru Report could not muster enough over all support, even Gandhi did not approve of it particularly on the question of the representation of Sikhs. J.S. Grewal explains:

The report prepared by the committee (Nehru Committee) recommended separate electorates for Muslims in provinces other than Punjab and Bengal. When the report was taken up in the All Parties meeting at Lucknow in August, the Sikh delegates raised the issue regarding their position in the Punjab. Some of them demanded that if separate electorates or weightage was to be maintained for minorities in other provinces then a similar provision should be made for the Sikhs. Most of the Sikh leaders dreaded the prospect of universal suffrage without reservation of seats for the Sikhs as a minority.¹⁰

Because of these reservations Sikh leadership (The Central Sikh League in particular) rejected Nehru Report and also decided to boycott the Lahore session of Congress. Gandhi, Moti Lal Nehru and M. A. Ansari met Master Tara Singh and Kharak Singh so that they could be persuaded to participate in the Congress session and pledged such a

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.159-160.

¹⁰ J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of The Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.168.

constitution whereby full satisfaction to the Sikhs and Muslims as minorities to be assured. Consequently Sikhs agreed to attend the Lahore Session. Congress Committee also 'replaced the goal of Dominion Status by complete independence.'¹¹

That report failed to please the Hindus of the Punjab too. Probably adult franchise had made them wary of the report which did not prescribe any weightage for the minorities, if adopted that provision would definitely have a negative bearing on their political status in the Punjab, where Muslims were in a clear majority. Afzal Haq and Jan Baz Mirza had altogether different observation as to the Sikh-Hindu response *vis-i-vis* the recommendations of Nehru Report. Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs had endorsed Nehru Report but both the communities held serious reservations against 'joint electorate' as proposed by Nehru Committee. Hence, they expected Muslims to take the initiative and raise voice against the proposed clause in the report. That version hardly seems tenable because it tries to question the intention rather than the action that can be historically verifiable. It is more likely that the commotion engendered by the Nehru Report among the minority communities, particularly Sikhs, made it very clear to Congress high command to dump the Nehru Report in the Ravi River, flowing quite close to where the session was held on 28th December 1929.¹²

While discarding Nehru Report, Congress leadership did not even bother to consult those individuals who had lent unequivocal support to it, that too at the behest of Congress itself. Such treatment of sheer indifference gave rise to grief and dismay in the ranks of Punjab Khilafat Committee who ultimately decided to devise their own course of action. When the participants of All India Congress Committee were disposing off the copies of Nehru Report into the Ravi River in one corner of the same *pindal* the leaders of the defunct Punjab Khilafat Committee were holding a meeting to form a new party, Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam on 29th December 1929 in Lahore.¹³

Another factor leading to the alienation of these people from Congress was the election of Amritsar Congress Committee. Dr. Saif ud Din Kichlow and Ghazi Abdul Rehman were the two contestants in that election and Ata ullah Shah Bokhari was the polling officer. Those elections were held on the basis of joint electorate. Dr. Kichlow won the elections to the chagrin of Afzal Haq and Ata-Ullah Shah Bokhari. Afzal

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.169.

¹² Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, p.86.

¹³ Hafiz Taqi-ud-Din, *Pakistan ki Siyasi Jamatain Aur Tehrikain* (Lahore: Fiction House, 1995), p.176.

Haq narrates the situation, prevailing on the eve of that election and also the estimate of the two candidates:

Dr. Saif ud Din was undoubtedly selfless but articulate person. He had established his writ among Hindus and Sikhs than Muslims. Therefore, he was not quite well known in the circle of Muslims. Since the zeal about freedom was very pronounced in him, that prevented him from becoming unpopular among the Muslims also. Whereas Ghazi Abdul Rehman had an enviable reputation that he earned through serving the interests of the local Muslims. He was eloquent speaker and well versed in the art of luring people to his side. Kitchlow won the contest because Hindu capitalists made substantial investment for Kitchlow, which proved to be a decisive factor in those elections. Ghazi did not have such backing, so he lost. After seeing the effect of joint electorate, Ata Ullah Shah prepared a resolution in favour of separate electorate. Ghazi also supported the move.¹⁴

That resolution worked as a catalyst, in the formation of Majlis-i-Ahrar as a separate political organization. Therefore, on July 1931, Ahrar Conference was convened in Habibia Hall of Islamia College Lahore which was presided over by Maulana Habib ur Rehman Ludhianvi and Maulana Daud Ghaznavi was its secretary. That conference provided a formal beginning to Ahrar. Addressing the audience, Maulana Habib ur Rehman declared: “ I want to tell all the nations of Hindustan in clear words that the Ahrars do not want to do any injustice to any other nation. However they are not prepared to live as a scheduled caste either. The Muslims are equally entitled to the share in the Indian affairs.”¹⁵ The assertion of Maulana Habib ur Rehman that Muslims must not be deemed ‘scheduled caste’ provides context to Afzal Haq’s reference recurrently made in both of his representative works namely *Tarikh i Ahrar* and *Meira Afsana* to the *choot chaat* (untouchability) practiced by the Congress Hindus against Muslims.¹⁶ That factor also provided sufficient reason for the Ahrar leaders to have their own course. Besides, the conference passed a unanimous resolution in favour of separate electorate for Indian Muslims that remained the only major undertaking of the daylong proceedings. The method of election and the issue of untouchability were the two out of three

¹⁴ Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *op.cit.*, pp.160-61.

¹⁵ Iftikhar Haider Malik, *Sikandar Hayat Khan*, p.55.

¹⁶ Afzal Haq, *Maira Afsana* (Lahore: Kutabnuma, 1991). Also see Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *op.cit.*, pp.160-61.

fundamental postulates, which remained its distinct features through out the course of its existence. *Khatam-i-Nabuwat* was the third and the more important of the previous two. That concept assumed extra ordinary significance ever since the *Ahmedya*¹⁷ sect was conjured into existence by the turn of the last century. That sect allegedly refutes the very idea of the last prophet hood, considered as one of the five fundamentals of Islam. Ahrar leadership claimed to be harbinger in censuring what it called an act of renege on the part of *Ahmedya* sect. Ahrar leaders through eloquence of the leaders like Ata ullah Shah Bokhari whipped up so much of an enthusiasm for *Khatam-i-Nabuwat* that it became the cornerstone of its agitational politics.

Ahrar Conference at Lahore drew a lot of criticism from the pro-Congress section of the press and Ahrar leadership was pegged as a bunch of renegades. Nevertheless, umbilical cord providing a link between Congress and Ahrar remained intact, though not fully, largely because of the deep reverence for Abul Kalam Azad and Gandhi seated among the front line leaders of the Ahrar. To work for complete Indian freedom through peaceful means, to provide political guidance to the Muslims and to strive for ensuring betterment of the Muslims in the fields of religion, education, economic and social plight, to promote indigenously manufactured products, to organize peasants and workers on the economic principles and to set up voluntary organizations by the name of *Jayush-i-Ahrarul Islam* in all the corners of India, were the main objectives of Ahrar. The working committee of Ahrar approved its party's red colour flag with white crescent and a star in the middle. Ahrar leaders decided red colour uniform for the Ahrar volunteers; they regularly held drill with a band and drum and carried hatchets.¹⁸ The decision was made in the memory of those *Khudai Khidmatgars* who died in Qissa Khwani Bazar, Peshawar, on 23 April 1930 by the colonial forces.¹⁹ Whereas Hafiz Taqi ud Din, an Ahrari veteran, contends that red uniform of the volunteers was a symbol of Khilafat day. During its early days, Ahrar volunteers were widely known as *surkhposh* but

¹⁷ For detail see Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Ahmadiyyah Movement*, translated and edited by S. Muhammad Tuffail (Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1973).

¹⁸ Jan Baz Mirza, *Karwan-e-Ahrar*, Vol. IV p.150, quoted in Javed Haider Syed, 'Pakistan Resolution and Majlis-e-Ahrar', in Kaniz Fatima Yusuf, Saleem Akhtar, and Razi Wasti (eds.), *Pakistan Resolution Revisited* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1990), p.402.

¹⁹ For details see Hafiz Taqi-ud-Din, *op.cit.*, p.105.

subsequently that appellation became specific for *Khudai Khidmatgars* of North Western Frontier Province.

Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam-i-Hind expounded the concept of *Hakumat-i-Illyia* in its annual meeting held at Sahranpur on 26 April 1943, through a resolution. That concept epitomized the political philosophy Ahrar doggedly followed and adhered to. *Hakumat-i-Illyia*²⁰ had its conceptual basis in unequivocal opposition to the British *raj*, as the very first clause of the resolution put forward at Saharanpur explicitly suggests (a) ‘we can not support any political move or settlement for which one has to go to London obsequiously and cringingly.’²¹ (b) *Hakumat-i-Illyia* called for more powers devolved to the provinces and considered the schemes like *Akhand Bharat* (United India), and establishment of Pakistan or independent Punjab as lethal for the communal harmony which to its reckoning was mandatory for fighting against British. (c) It laid optimum stress on inter-communal peace and also called for peace with in the Muslims. Ahrar would not oppose any effort aiming at forging some alliance between Congress and Muslim League but Ahrar itself would not have any alliance with any political group. (d) Most significant was Ahrar’s avowed stand against any machination professing division on the basis of geographical, ethnic or linguistic considerations that to them was not religious obligation of the Muslims. They must comply with the edicts of Allah and his Prophet.

Majlis-i-Ahrar turned into an all India body on 10 September 1932 when Sheikh Hassam ud Din called a meeting of the leaders and the workers in Amritsar. The prime objective of that meeting was to organize Majlis-i-Ahrar on all India basis. Therefore, 500 representatives from all across India participated in that meeting which was held in the hall of Islamia High School Sharif Pura. Sheikh Hassam ud Din presided over the meeting in which various decisions were taken and resolutions unanimously passed. Enlisting members from all over India, broadening the base of volunteer organization down to all districts, every member to pay one *anna* as a party fund, setting up of relief fund for volunteers who were in prison were some of the main decisions taken at the meeting. Besides, eradication of un-Islamic beliefs and traditions that had crept

²⁰ See Mushirul Hassan, *Legacy of Divided Nation: India’s Muslim since Independence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.66. Also see Shores Kashmiri, *Bou-e-Gul, Nala-e-Dil, Dood-e-Charach-e-Mahfil* (Lahore: Chattan, 1972), pp.305-21, M.Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan* (Islamabad: National Commission of Historical and Cultural Research, 1976), p.27.

²¹ For a brief reference see Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, p.61.

into Muslims over a period of time, making efforts to ameliorate the lot of the poor and to bring out a daily newspaper to publicize the aims and objectives of the Ahrar were other important points of its agenda. Furthermore, Ahrar reiterated its allegiance with highly radical economic ideals. Even Ahrar's political philosophy had immense idealistic content, encapsulated in the concept of *Hakumat-i-Illayia*.²²

The stand point of Ahrar amply shows complete in-compatibility between the political ideologies of Muslim League and Majlis-i-Ahrar. Despite this disparity they cobbled up an election alliance in 1936.²³ That alliance, however, could not last very long because of the inherent contradictions between the separatist stand of Muslim League and Ahrar's aversion for any division based on linguistic or ethnic differentiation. Therefore, the issue of fee for party ticket drove a wedge between the components of the alliance that took nobody by surprise. When the Muslim League Central Committee at once raised the fee for the party ticket from Rs. 50 to Rs. 500, Ahrar registered its discordant note. Ashique Hussain Batalvi states in his celebrated book *Iqbal Key Akhree Do Saal* that Ahrar had an impression that the *nawabs* of various Muslim princely states and Muslim traders and *seths* from Bombay had contributed generously in the League fund specifically for the elections.²⁴ Its leadership, therefore, was expectantly looking towards League to bear the election expenses of the Ahrari candidates. Chaudhri Afzal Haq and Maulana Habib ur Rehman were hoping that the exorbitant sum to the tune of at least Rs.100,000 would be set aside for the election expenses exclusively of Ahrar candidates. When the reality dawned on them (that League had no exorbitant funds) they decided to part ways with League and resigned from the Muslim League Parliamentary Board. When he reiterated the same view in the lectures he delivered at the request of the University of Punjab, in 1965, Taj ud Din Ludhianvi and Shorish Kashmiri retorted vehemently, calling it a malevolent act of stigmatizing the otherwise flawless character of Ahrar leaders.²⁵ All said and done, the alliance between the parties who had set their goals diametrically opposed to each other was a 'marriage of convenience' solemnized at the

²² See for details, Jan Baz Mirza, *Karwan-e-Ahrar* Vol.I (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Tabsara, 1975), pp. 303-310.

²³ M. Rafique Afzal, *op.cit.*, p.27.

²⁴ For details see Taj ud Din Ludhyanvi, *Majlis-e-Ahrar aur Tariqehi Tahrieef ki Yalghar* (Lahore: Markazi Maktaba Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam Pakistan, 1968), pp. 5-13., Ashique Hussain Batalvi, *Iqbal key Akhri Doo Saal* (Lahore: Idara-i-Saqafat-e-Islamia, 1989), p.321.

²⁵ For details see Taj ud Din Ludhyanvi, *op.cit.*, pp.14-18; Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *op.cit.*, p.185.

altar of expediency. The ‘marriage of convenience’ came about in the wake of Jinnah’s failure to woo Fazl-i-Hussain into political/electoral agreement. Jinnah then had to settle for an electoral alliance with Ahrar. Ahrar’s phenomenal popularity, earned during its campaigns in Kashmir and Kapurthala, was diminished after Masjid Shaheed Ganj issue. Once a conglomeration of towering figures in the Punjab politics was reduced to a pack of nonentities. Deprived of moral and political appeal, necessary for attracting voters, Ahrar had to seek the support of some other party, to salvage its lost prestige. In total disregard to its earlier stand, it joined Muslim League Parliamentary Board. Consequently, the break up of the alliance was a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, before proceeding any further, emergence of Ahrar needs to be situated and contextualized, which demands us to briefly touch upon the political and social scenario of Punjab at that time.²⁶

II

Right after Lahore Conference where it assumed a formal status of a political party, Majlis-i-Ahrar straight away plunged into political activism and thereafter secured enough credibility among the lower echelons of the Punjabi Muslims. Ahrar’s support went many notches up within a few years span specifically among the Muslim city dwellers. In the 1930’s Ahrar remained the major player in the Muslim politics of the province vis-a-vis Unionist Party till Masjid Shahid Ganj issue²⁷ dealt a sever blow to the rising scale of its popularity. Issues of varying significance like Kashmir Movement, Kapurthala Movement or issue of Maclagan College Lahore, where the principal passed blasphemous remarks against Holy Prophet, kept Ahrar politically alive in the 1930s. Such issues, however, could not ensure sustenance to the Ahrar particularly when it had highly resourceful adversary to contend with, that obviously was Unionist Party. Ironically, Ahrar’s political activism remained mostly within the limits of the Punjab where Unionist Party had a complete sway ever since its birth in 1923. Unionist Party represented the stakes of the agricultural elite of the province. All the major landlords, tribal *sardars* and chieftains had gathered under its banner. Interestingly, the founder of that party, Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, hailed from an urban middle class background. Fazl-i-Hussain’s political sagacity performed a miraculous feat by welding all those chieftains with varying backgrounds and interests together and conjured Unionist Party

²⁶ Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *ibid.*, pp. 184-185; M. Rafique Afzal, *op.cit.*, p.27.

²⁷ Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar, *Masla-e-Shaheed Ganj* (Lahore: Bukhari Academy, n.d.), p.38.

into existence.²⁸ In order to put the Unionist Party into proper perspective, the agricultural elite and its bond with the British *raj* need bit of attention.²⁹

All the chieftains of important *biradaris* of the Punjab like Mazaris, Legharis, Mamdots, Khans of Kasur, Noons, Maliks, Khattars, Syeds, Qureshis, Gilanis, Gardezis, Qazilbashs, Daultanas, Gurmanis, Tiwanas offered their allegiance to the *raj* after the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. Their loyalty to the British made them the most powerful pressure group in the politics and administration of Punjab. Firoz Khan Noon, in his autobiography, says about these landed aristocrats ‘were the most loyal, elderly men belonging to well to do classes...(they) had no political opinion, except those which British liked.’ They invariably facilitated the British *raj* in its military ventures by enlisting recruits for the Imperial Army, cementing their mutuality even further. The passage of the Land Alienation Act in 1901, invigorated them even more vis-à-vis urban middle classes of the province.³⁰ Laissez-faire was set at rest simply to guard agriculturists from money lenders who had proliferated in the second half of 19th century. Agriculturists’ representation in the Punjab Legislative Council (PLC), created in 1897, reflected their predominant position in the realm of legislation. During the first decade of its existence, PLC was geared to preclude any potential danger, likely to be posed to the agriculturist elite by urban bourgeoisie. Azim Hussain perceptively comments. ‘The British policy, conceived with enough foresight in 1900, of driving a wedge between the countryside and the city to stem the tide of nationalism in the Punjab countryside was thus crowned with success.’³¹

Agricultural interests institutionalized themselves in the form of a political party in 1923, during dyarchy era. Unionist Party as it came to be known, soon established its foot hold quite firmly in the Punjab. Apart from Fazl-i-Hussain, Sikander Hayat, Shahab-ud-Din, Umer Hayat Tiwana, Ahmed Yar Khan Daulatana and Chotu Ram were the Unionist stalwarts. All of them were leading landlords of the Punjab with unquestioned loyalty towards British. Barring their loyalist tendencies, Unionists had ingenious leader in Fazl-i-Hussain who was, undoubtedly,

²⁸ For the role of landlord and tribal leaders in the Punjab politics see the most exhaustive and well quoted document on Unionist Party is Azim Husain, *Fazal-i-Husain: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: Longman, Green & Co. Ltd., 1946), pp. 226-66. Ashique Hussain Batalvi, *op.cit.*, p.320.

²⁹ For detail see Azim Husain, *ibid.*

³⁰ G.Norman Barrier, *The Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900*, Durham, 1960.

³¹ Azim Husain, *op.cit.*

head and shoulders above all those trying their luck in the politics of the Punjab. Therefore, Ahrar had to contend, not only with fortified landed interests but also with their leadership who had exceptional political sagacity and self-assurance. To start with, Fazl-i-Hussain revered Chaudhri Afzal Haq because of his rectitude and forthrightness, which he had demonstrated in the Punjab Legislative Council. Afzal Haq too, held Fazl-i-Hussain in high esteem. In *Tarikh-i-Ahrar*, he rates him as the best political figure among the Muslims, even M A Jinnah could not match his sagacity and ingeniousness in the political arena.³² That mutual respect and regard fell apart when Fazl-i-Hussain recommended Sir Zafarullah Khan, an Ahmedi leader from the Punjab for a vacant slot in Viceroy's Executive Council. Ahrar because of its uncompromising stand on the issue of *Khatam-i-Nabuwat*, deemed it out of question to get along with *Ahmediya* sect or even any well wisher of it as Fazl-i-Hussain was believed to be, by the former. Henceforth he became a special target of Ahrar's wrath and Unionist Party found an arch-enemy in the form of Ahrar in the 1930s until Shaheed Ganj Masjid issue provided it a reprieve. Ahrar, along with its revolutionary agenda, undoubtedly caused a few tremors among the ranks of the Unionists; however, it could hardly strike deeper roots in rural Punjab, where the actual power lied.³³

Sajjada Nashins infused an added vigour through thousands of their devotees to already impregnable Unionist Party. They had successfully countered the religious appeal of the Ahrar, who had among their leaders the religious scholars from all the sects of Islamic faith. Nevertheless, the overall impact on Ahrar in terms of religion³⁴ came from Deoband. Deoband professed puritanical version of Islam that emphasized man-God relationship without any intermediary, also calling for strict adherence to the edicts of *Sharia*. Obviously in such religious setting, *sufi* saints hardly had any space.³⁵ When it came to the Punjab, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, Deobandi brand of Islam had no chance of evoking any response against *pirs* and saints who were reputed to have disseminated Islam in the region. Such perception earned them reverence that of an *avatar* in the Hindu

³² Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, p.209.

³³ For details see Azim Husain, *op.cit.*

³⁴ The Ahrar leader included representatives of other sects, like Dawud Ghaznawi from the Ahl-e-Hadith and Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar, who was of *Shii* descent, a cooperation that was based less on common doctrinal ground than on shared allegiance to the Congress. For details see Dietrich Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India 1900-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.78.

³⁵ Mushirul Hassan, *op.cit.*, p.04.

theology. Traditionally *maulavis* did not cut much ice with rural populace of the Punjab primarily because most of them hailed from the lower substratum. Hence low status in terms of class precluded them to pose any political threat to the deeply entrenched interests of the *pirs-zamindar*. Ironically Ahrar too were perceived to be a collectivity of lower middle class *maulvis* who could not appeal the prevalent religious sensibility.

Despite all these hazards, Majlis-i-Ahrar found the prevailing circumstances conducive enough for their subscribed way of doing politics. The economic depression, unleashed because of Wall Street crash down in 1929 also impacted Punjab quite adversely. It entailed a steep fall in the prices of agricultural commodities, badly affecting small peasants and the landless labourers. Even the relatively better off 'middle' peasant proprietors could not escape the disastrous fallout. The paltry wages of the workers were squeezed even further. Government employees also suffered 10 percent cut in their salaries.³⁶ Such was the situation in the 1930s, when Ahrar was stirred into action. Its radical political agenda promising economic equality perfectly suited to the crisis-ridden scenario, obtaining in the Punjab. At the end of 1934 elections were held for the Central Legislative Assembly. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain picked Khan Bahadur Rahim Baksh as Unionist candidate for a constituency comprising four districts namely Lahore, Amritsar, Ferozepur and Gurdaspur. Ahrar fielded Khalid Latif Gabba (he was son of Lala Harkishen Lal and had embraced Islam) as their candidate. As the time for the election drew in the propaganda for Ahrar candidate gathered momentum causing panic to the Unionists, nevertheless they were sure of victory. Surprisingly enough Ahrar won that crucial seat belying not only the high hopes of the Unionist Party but also to the dismay of the British government, who could not afford to loose election in the very heart of the province that was the major recruiting area for its army. Undoubtedly the eventual outcome of that election amply prove Ghulam Rasul Mehr's point. Ahrar indeed was at peak of its popularity in the early 1930s. Ahrar earned that popularity through the agitational mode of politics which became its essential feature. Ahrar agitational prowess was put to test in a campaign for Kashmiri Muslims.

³⁶ Ajeet Javed, *Left Politics in Punjabi*, translated by Tahir Kamran, *Punjab main Bain Bazo ki Siyasat* (Lahore: Fiction House, 1998), p.98.

III

Pathetic state of the Kashmiri Muslims drew Ahrar's attention, providing it a *raison d'être* for launching an agitation in 1931.³⁷ The very first step in the realm of politics clearly pointed to the 'agitational activism' as their way of doing politics when its leaders executed their plan to invade Kashmir to rescue their Muslim brethren from the oppressive rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. However, it seems appropriate to put the situation then prevailing in Kashmir in historical perspective.

The princely state of Kashmir had an area of 84,000 square miles and the population according to the 1941 census was 4 millions of which 3.2 millions were Muslims.³⁸ For administrative purposes, the state had been divided into three provinces-the Frontier Province (districts of Ladakh and Gilgit), Kashmir Province (districts of Anantnag, Baramula and Muzaffargarh) and Jammu Province (districts of Mirpur, Reasi, Jammu, Udhampur and Kathua). Besides these, there was the Poonch unit, which was a *jagir* of the Maharaja. Kashmir was transferred to Gulab Singh Dogra, the ancestor of Maharaja Hari Singh, in 1846 by the British in return for a sum of 7.5 million rupees (Nanakshahi). Gulab Singh, in the acknowledgment of the British supremacy over Kashmir would "present annually to the British Government one horse, twelve goats (six male and six female) and three pairs of Kashmiri shawls."³⁹

Dogra rule was notorious for its 'autocratically wayward methods of administration' and its religious intolerance. Killing a cow was a cognizable offence punishable with seven years rigorous imprisonment. Special tax was levied on the slaughter of goats and sheep, even on *Eid*, a Muslim religious festival. A Hindu in case of embracing Islam had to forfeit all his inherited property. The state had usurped many Muslim places of worship and pilgrimage, which the Glancy Commission subsequently restored to the Muslims in 1931. Such discrimination reflected quite conspicuously on the distribution of economic resources. As Victoria Schofield (quotes Abdul Suhrawardy, a young lad from the rural districts of Kashmir, telling about the Muslim's state in the public jobs) reveals:

As I grew up I found that the Muslims were underdogs. The Hindus were the privileged class because they belonged to the

³⁷ For details see Taj ud Din Ludhyanvi, *Ahrar Aur Tehrik-e-Kashmir 1932* (Lahore: Maktaba-i-Majlis-e-Ahrar Islam, 1968).

³⁸ Alstair Lamb, *Kashmir a Disputed Legacy* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 03., Mirza Shafique Hussain, *Azad Kashmir ek Siyasi Jaiza* (Islamabad: Qaumi Idara Bara-i- Tahqiq, Tarikh-o-Saqafat, nd), p.03.

³⁹ Jan Baz Mirza, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.172.

religion of the community of the ruler. Almost all the government officials occupying almost all the ranks from the lowest up to the highest were occupied by Hindus.⁴⁰

Suddans of Poonch and the Sandans from Mirpur were the only people among the Muslims, recruited into the army but in the Subaltern positions. They were culturally different from the Kashmiris of the valley therefore Maharaja believed he could use them to quell any uprising stirred by the valley people.⁴¹

Muslim newspapers from the Punjab, in the 1920s and the early 1930s, consistently, highlighted the miserable plight of the Kashmiri Muslims. The daily *Inqalab* and its editor, Abdul Majid Salik, were particularly critical on the discriminatory policies of Maharaja Hari Singh towards the Muslims. Resultantly, the entry of the daily *Inqalab* in the state of Kashmir was disallowed.⁴² That provided one of many causes to the events that unfolded in 1931.

A landlord from tehsil Udhampur of Jammu province embraced Islam. Therefore, his right over his hereditary property was revoked by the state functionaries causing a lot of resentment among the Muslims of Kashmir. 'Purify yourself and you will get your property' was the advice of the judge to the slighted landlord. Hindus demolished a mosque in Riasi in Jammu province with the approval of the Maharaja's government. Similarly in a Degore village, Muslims were prevented to offer congregational prayer. When that news reached other parts of Kashmir, it evoked disquiet and indignation among the Muslim masses. Then, another incident took place which escalated the situation even further. In the police line of Jammu jail, a Hindu head constable not only passed sacrilegious remarks on the Holy Quran but also flung it in the dust. On 29 April 1931, the temper of the Muslims reached its highest point when on the eve of *Eid uz Zuha*, an Arya Deputy Inspector Police forbade the *khateeb* to deliver *khutba*. 'You can offer prayer but you are not to deliver any lecture' the deputy inspector exhorted.⁴³

Such were the circumstances that had set the stage for the bloody events of 13 July 1931. Consequently Kashmir turned in to a powder keg through fiery denunciations from mosque pulpits, processions and public meetings. On 25 June 1931 Abdul Qadeer, a Muslim from Amroha,

⁴⁰ Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in the Crossfire* (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), p.100.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁴² Abdul Majid Salik, *Sar Gazasht* (Lahore: Al Faisal, 1993), p.264.

⁴³ For the general details see Jan Baz Mirza, *Karwan-e-Ahrar* Vol.I (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Tabsara, 1975), pp.236-37.

district Muradabad, who was in Srinagar as a guide to a few English travelers, made a vehement speech urging Muslims to launch active struggle against Maharaja's rule. State authorities promptly arrested Abdul Qadeer, which provided a fresh lease of life to the public demonstration and protest. When his trial began in the session courts of Srinagar on 6 July 1931, Muslims assembled there in such a huge number that proceedings were shifted to the securer environment of Srinagar Central Jail. When the trial commenced at the newer venue, people thronged again and police ruthlessly baton charged them. Demonstrators did not take it lying low and retaliated. Pandemonium ensued resulting in injuries to a few policemen. Exasperated, the police opened fire killing twenty-two demonstrators. Therefore, 13 July 1931 came to be known as 'Martyrs Day'. These killings immediately gave rise to clashes between Muslim demonstrators and the state police through out Jammu and Kashmir. That movement later on turned communal when a procession of demonstrators forced a Punjabi Hindu shopkeeper to close his shop in protest. But he refused to do so. Consequently, protestors ransacked his shop. Few other shops belonging to Hindus met the same fate. As a result, law enforcement agencies of the state arrested more than three hundred Muslims including Chaudhri Ghulam Abbass and Shiekh Abdullah. Nevertheless, Maharaja's government could not do much beyond managing to restore uneasy calm in the state. Sporadic processions, strikes and riots kept the tension soaring in Kashmir.

The untoward incident of 13 July did not go unnoticed in British India. During the last week of July, leading Muslims assembled at Nawab Sir Zulfiqar Ali's residence at Simla and formed All India Kashmir Committee.⁴⁴ The head of the Ahmediya community, Mirza Bashir Ahmed was Kashmir Committee's President and Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Sir Zulfiqar Ali, Khawja Hassan Nizami, Syed Mohsin Shah, Khan Bahadur Sheikh Rahim Baksh, Maulana Ismael Ghaznavi, Maulana Abdul Rahim Dard, Maulana Nur-ul-Haq (owner of English daily *Out Look*), Syed Habib Shah (owner daily *Siasat*) were its members. The committee avowed to redress the grievances of Kashmiri Muslims through peaceful and constitutional means. Therefore, it called for the appointment of an impartial commission of enquiry to determine the background leading to the crisis. It, also enunciated to observe 14 August as a special Kashmir Day in the memory of the martyrs of 13 July 1931.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.181.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Ahrar could not agree to the ways and means, employed by the elite group pretending as sympathizer of the Kashmiri Muslims. Ahrar leadership smelt a conspiracy of the Ahmedis, hatched in order to propagate their own creed using Kashmir Committee as its instrument. 'The Muslim members of the committee found that the work being done under the Committee was nothing less than the preaching of Ahmediya doctrines.' Syed Noor Ahmed opines that the most important reason that prompted Iqbal's dissociation from the committee was its Ahmedi persuasion. He quotes Iqbal saying, 'no Muslim could work with the Ahmedis for the objectives they were trying to accomplish.' Similarly, apprehensive of Ahmedi community's surging influence in Kashmir, Afzal Haq, Ata ullah Shah Bokhari and Mazhar Ali Azhar execrated them with full force of their proverbial eloquence and evoked considerable response from the masses in support of their stand.⁴⁶ In the meanwhile, Ahrar leadership requested the Government of the Kashmir for an inquiry committee to be permitted into the valley but after getting no response, it forced its entry into Kashmir. On their way Ata Ullah Shah Bokhari, Afzal Haq and Mazhar Ali Azhar addressed huge rallies at Gujranwala and Sialkot, which caused a lot of concern for the state government, however, on the advice of Hari Kishan Kaul, they got free passage. That delegation failed to muster enough support and returned to reorganize itself for active struggle. In the meanwhile, Government of India and the Government of the State invited Ahrar for another visit to Kashmir. Ahrar leaders put forth their demand for the establishment of responsible government in the state. Ahrar also wanted to woo Sheikh Abdullah, main leader of National Conference. However, Sheikh Abdullah did not respond to their call in affirmative, and the support for Ahrar from within the valley remained slender. Not surprisingly the demand of the Ahrar for responsible government proved merely a cry in the wilderness. Ahrar despite these practical hazards was determined not to give up on Kashmir issue. Soon afterwards, batches of 21 Ahrar volunteers sneaked into Kashmir. From the Punjab alone, according to one estimate, 45 thousand volunteers entered and courted arrest. Such massive invasion by Ahrar volunteers paralyzed the state machinery and Maharaja found it expedient to replace Har Kishan Kaul and appointed a new Prime Minister, Colonel E.J.D. Colvin. Indian Political Department also approved him (he remained in office until 1936).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Syed Nur Ahmed, *From Martial Law to Martial Law: Politics in the Punjab, 1919-1958* (Lahore: Vangaurd Books, 1985), p.129.

⁴⁷ For details see Jan Baz Mirza, *op.cit.*, Vol.1, pp.255-79.

Maharaja also made a reconciliatory move and constituted an Enquiry Commission. A senior officer in the Political Department of India, Sir Bertrand Glancy was the head of the commission. Prem Nath Bazaz and Ghulam Abbas were amongst the co-members of the commission. However, such a measure could not appease Ahrar because they had aimed at securing responsible government for Kashmir that was not in the offing. Ahrar failed to attain what it had aspired yet one must not wrest the credit away from it, because it was their aggressive mode of activism that compelled Maharaja to appoint Glancy Commission which undoubtedly was a step toward a right direction. Ironically, Victoria Schofield and Alastair Lamb had cast Ahrar off in their otherwise brilliant works on Kashmir.⁴⁸

The situation then obtaining in Kashmir had a profound bearing on the neighbouring Punjab. The communal antagonism witnessed in Kashmir earlier on sparked off a similar situation in the state of Kapurthala in 1933.⁴⁹ The state of Kapurthala was situated on the west of the River Bias, in the province of Punjab. In the early 1930s, a Sikh ruler Maharaja Jagjeet Singh was at the helm. Kapurthala had 57 per cent of Muslim population and vast majority of them were peasants and living in utter misery. Sixty per cent of the state income accrued through the taxes paid by Muslim peasants but the state expended a meager sum of Rs. 8,440 on poor Muslims as stipends and charity whereas Rs.68, 338 were allocated for the welfare of the non-Muslims.⁵⁰ In the early 1930s, when the impact of the Kashmir movement reached Kapurthala Begowal area assumed the prime importance. It had majority of Rajput Muslim population which was generally sympathetic to Kashmiri Muslims. Another quite tangible effect cast on the Muslims of Kapurthala by the Kashmir situation was the sense of distinct identity of their own situation vis-a-vis Hindus. The factor that worked as a catalyst in the process of awakening among the Muslims of Begowal was primarily their economic exploitation at the hands of Hindu moneylenders.⁵¹ Since Land Alienation Act (1901) was not in place in the princely states of the Punjab, therefore, moneylenders operated freely at the expense of peasants. In Begowal the majority of the cultivators belonged to the cultivator class, many of them lost their land to moneylenders. Deprived of their only mean of livelihood, they had to face the agony of cultivating

⁴⁸ For the details of Glancy Commission see *ibid.*, pp.314-15; Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, pp.125-26.

⁴⁹ See for details, Jan Baz Mirza, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, pp.324-29.

⁵⁰ Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, p.165.

⁵¹ Abu Yusuf Qasmi, *Mufaker-e-Ahrar*, p.174-75; Afzal Haq, *ibid.*, pp.142-46.

the same piece of land as a tenants or farm labourers. Such had been the circumstances when Kashmir movement had picked up momentum also creating a stir among the hitherto complacent Muslim community of Kapurthala. They organized fund raising campaign for Kashmiri Muslims and held a huge rally at Begowal. That rally egged the Muslims of the vicinity to think in terms of reforming themselves. As a result, Muslims boycotted Hindu shopkeepers who, according to them, were their exploiters. The Muslims in the vanguard of the campaign considered it a necessary recourse for diverting the economic potential of the Muslim community of Begowal toward trade.⁵² Muslims forbade their women from going out to shop from Hindu shopkeepers. They deemed it very important for moral and economic reformation. Muslims of that area constituted volunteer body to all consumer goods for the houses without men. Apparently, that was an act of innocuous nature, nevertheless, Hindu moneylenders and shopkeepers had been quite vociferous in condemning it and pegged it as ‘picketing’ perpetrated at the behest of Muslim communalists and, in protest, announced a two-day strike. During the first day of strike, a Muslim died. His guardian when went to the market to buy cloth for deceased’s coffin he could not obtain the required cloth from anywhere. Similarly, grocery shops also remained closed denying people goods of everyday use. Consequently, Muslims seized the opportunity by setting up their own shops in Begowal and Bholeth areas. That development exasperated the traditional Hindu shopkeepers. They refused advancing further loans to Muslim peasants and pressed them for the immediate return of the money, lent to them earlier. Chaudhri Abdul Aziz of Begowal, Vice President of the Majlis-i-Ahrar was among the first ones, who voiced his concern over a crisis that Muslim peasantry had plunged into, under the umbrella of Zamindara League. That was an organization formed by him to guard the interest of the cultivators and the landowners, just after 1931. That movement spearheaded by Zamindara League gained momentum when the Ahrar volunteers, after being set free by the Kashmir government in Feb-March 1932, started crossing over to Kapurthala. They considered moneylenders/shopkeepers responsible for misery of the peasantry of Begowal. When Ahrar volunteers took to the streets espousing the cause of poor peasantry state government came very hard on them. State authorities arrested Abdul Aziz of Begowal and sentenced him to five years of rigorous imprisonment for inciting

⁵² Abdullaha Malik, *Punjab ki Siyasi Tahrikain* (Lahore: Kausar Publishers, 1986), pp.194-204.

trouble and disrupting peace. Despite these harsh measures, Ahrar continued lending unequivocal support to the peasants.

When in the first week of January 1934, the Land Alienation law was enforced mostly because of the pressure, exerted by the Zamindara movement; moneylenders/shopkeepers began civil disobedience.⁵³ They also put forward a demand for the establishment of an executive council to take care of the administration of the state. Maharaja acquiesced to the demand and set up the council with six members, two of them would be Muslims. Although that was a step in the right direction but it also had a negative bearing on the communal sensitivities. As the council's establishment became public, Muslims registered serious reservation as to the quantum of representation specified for them. On the other hand, moneylenders (overwhelming number of them were Hindus) rightly thought, they had scored a point, by making Maharaja set up Executive Council. In those circumstances, Majlis-i-Ahrar took an initiative and held Ahrar conference on 3-4 April 1934. In the final resolution of that conference, establishment of a responsible assembly and job opportunities for the Muslims in proportion to their population, were put forward as the main demands. Prime Minister's response was quite encouraging. He assured that the issues broached at the conference would surely be considered.⁵⁴ Such a response agitated the non-Muslims. Therefore, as Abdullah Malik, a known sympathizer to the cause of Ahrar states, 'in a bid to foil any such attempt to ameliorate the lot of the peasants, subjected to the exploitative modes of the affluent class (comprising Hindu Moneylenders and Sikh officials who were also engaged in the practice of lending money as a side business) it fanned the flame of communalism.'⁵⁵ The situation got aggravated when, on 16 February, a Muslim peasant killed a moneylender by the name of Khushi Ram. That incident added fuel to the smouldering embers of communal mistrust, paving the way for the ensuing riots. The communal riots erupted, subsequently, at Sultanpur.

The situation already vitiated by the communal malice became more ominous with every passing moment. However, the communitarian perception of the movement hampered its popularity cutting across the communal loyalties, limiting its appeal to the Muslims only. Therefore, it failed to muster any substantial support among the Sikh cultivators of the state. That factor, in fact, proved as a chink in the movement's armour.

⁵³ For details see Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, pp.164-66, Abdullaha Malik, *op.cit.*, pp.188-89.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.166.

⁵⁵ Abdullaha Malik, *op.cit.*, p.202.

In June 1932, Muslims of Bholeth submitted a list of demands calling for the implementation of all those reforms already carried out in other parts of India. Among other demands the introduction of Land Alienation Act, security of the non-transferable land of labourers and artisans against any act of forfeiting or confiscation and reduction in the land revenue were significant.⁵⁶

Maharaja, after sensing the gravity of the situation, constituted a committee headed by the magistrate of that particular area to ascertain the causes of communal problem and to help bring about harmony among the alienated communities. Fatefully that committee could not deliver because of insouciance of its president. After the aborted attempt to restore communal harmony through that unity committee, Prime Minister of Kapurthala state, Sir Abdul Hameed, invited the representatives of both the parties for parleys. Agriculturists soon started casting doubts on the impartiality of the Prime Minister, who had forced the peasants to till the land, which belonged to the moneylenders. In that particular circumstance, the peasants and agriculturist felt the noose of the state's authoritarianism tightened around their necks, because the state officials and the moneylenders/shopkeepers class had united against agriculturists of Begowal and Bholeth. Secretary General of Ahrar, Dasoha, District Hoshiarpur stated in the daily *Zamindar*:

The peasantry and labourers of this Tehsil (Bholeth) are passing through a very critical phase. The Northern part of the Tehsil which is largely inhabited by the Muslims have fallen prey to the atrocities of the Police and Civil officers, who have made the lives of these poor fellows so miserable that many of them are ready to migrate from the area.⁵⁷

Disquiet caused by the upsurge among the ranks of Begowal Muslim peasantry remained unabated in the southern belt of Kapurthala state when another event, alarmingly horrid in the given circumstances, was unfolded adding into the gravity of already tense situation. On 22 April 1934, Kapurthala state police baton charged the Muharram procession at Sultanpur Lodhi. But the real tragedy was yet to occur. In the month of Muharram in Sultanpur District, the *tazia* procession had a prescribed route through a particular street where a huge oak tree was obstructing a smooth passage for *tazia*. Muslims had planned to chop the over grown branches of the tree but Hindus of the area had serious objections to such a plan. Apart from Hindus, Sikhs also revered that very tree which according to them Bibi Nanki (sister of Baba Guru

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-90.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.186-87.

Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion) planted many centuries ago. However, on 30 April, the joint statement of Master Tara Singh and Prof. Jodha Singh, the honourable members of Gurdwara Parbandah Committee Amritsar, published in the daily *Tribune*, exploded that myth. They categorically denied the sacrosanct status of that tree. Moreover, they also questioned the oldness of the tree. Unfortunately, that statement came when all the damage had already been done.⁵⁸

All the pleas of Chaudhri Abdul Hameed of Begowal to all the communities to observe some measure of flexibility went heedless, they remained obdurate. Muslim processionists were adamant to pass through the contentious route with their *tazia*, on the other hand Hindus and Sikhs did not seem to relent either. They vowed to resist any attempt to cut the out-grown branches of the oak tree at whatever the cost it might incur. Government officials also turned a blind eye to that potentially volcanic state of affair. Prime Minister of Kapurthala was in Sultanpur at the beginning of that controversy. He could have saved such a gory incident from happening simply by engaging himself with the three communities, odiously disposed towards each other. That tangle could have been resolved by means of negotiation and persuasion. Instead, the state administration resorted to arrest 450 people in two days to prevent any untoward incident. Those large-scale arrests on 22 April 1934 could not prevent the tragedy that happened on 26 April (10 Muharram). On that fateful day the *tazia* procession advanced on its way and reached forty yards to the contentious oak tree when the rival party started firing, killing 20 Muslims and injuring 33 of them.⁵⁹

On 2 May, working committee of Majlis-i-Ahrar, met at Lahore and expressed its grief over the tragedy of Sultanpur. Ironically, no one else but Ahrar took serious note of that incident with the exception of the daily *Inqalab*. The Ahrar constituted a deputation comprising Abdul Ghaffar Ghaznavi and Abdul Gaffar Akhtar on 27 April 1934. That deputation went to Phagwara, Begowal and Sultanpur to investigate the whole affair. The deputation presented its findings to the meeting of the working committee, which laid the whole blame on Hindus and Sikhs. It incriminated state government of blithe negligence. However the report was the representation of the Muslim's side of the story. Central Majlis-i-Ahrar announced to commemorate 11 May as the Sultanpur day.⁶⁰

On 7 May Prime Minister of Kapurthala, also decided to hold an enquiry of the Sultanpur killings and its report appeared in the press on 7

⁵⁸ For further details see Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, pp.154-57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.164; Abdullaha Malik, *op.cit.*, pp.197-201.

⁶⁰ Abdullaha Malik, *op.cit.*, pp.203-04.

June 1934. The report of the two member committee, held the Inspector General Police, Major Kothewala guilty for the massacre; therefore, Prime Minister immediately sacked him. Nevertheless, it brought hardly any gratification to Ahrar. Its leadership demanded far sterner punitive action against the culprit. Merely termination of the accused from the service which had perpetrated massacre of innocent people was, to the leadership of Ahrar, a travesty of justice.⁶¹

Kapurthala movement was a very important link in the chain of events that enhanced the credibility of the Ahrar as an organization who reposed firm belief in the politics of activism and agitation. Ahrar volunteers never flinched from courting arrest, taking out processions in protest or resorting to civil disobedience etc. That peculiar style of doing politics had its roots in the class character of Ahrar. Furthermore it provided voice to the downtrodden classes particularly among the Muslims; it kept opposing the British *raj* with utmost vehemence. One dimension of Ahrar's politics, which needs proper acknowledgment, was its eagerness to extend all possible help to the suffering people, whether in Kashmir, Alwar, Kapurthala or Quetta where countless people died in the earthquake in 1935. After the calamity had hit Quetta, 'Ahrars performed outstanding service in connection with the relief work...Among the camps set up by non-government agencies the most organized and helpful was that of the Ahrars.'⁶²

IV

Agitational way of doing politics, exemplified in the movements of Kashmir and Kapurthala had established Ahrar as a political force to be reckoned with, particularly among the urban middle class of Punjabi Muslims. By 11 February 1934, Ahrar had three representatives in the Punjab Legislative Council, namely Chaudhri Afzal Haq from Hoshiarpur, Chaudhri Abdul Rehman from Jullundur and Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar from Lahore.⁶³ That indicated the soaring scale of Ahrar's popularity in the province and the political climate bode extremely well for them in the forth-coming provincial elections under the new constitutional set up. Then in July 1935, the Masjid-i-Shaheed Ganj incident took place as if out of nowhere and the political goodwill that Ahrar quite painstakingly earned during last few years started

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.204.

⁶² For details see Jan Baz Mirza, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, pp.193-201.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Vol.I, p.411-12.

eroding.⁶⁴ The issue of Shaheed Ganj revolved around a mosque (Abdullah Khan Ki Masjid), situated at some distance from Lahore Railway Station. Khan-i-Saman of Dara Shikoh (the Crown Prince of Shah Jehan), whose name was Abdullah Khan, built the Mosque in 17th century. Before the onset of the Sikh rule the Muslims used to pray in that mosque.

When the Sikhs rebelled against Mughals, the Governor of the Punjab Nawab Moin ul Mulk was entrusted with the task of quelling the Sikh rebellion. During those days, adjacent to the mosque was a *kotwali*, where criminals or dissidents were executed. One of such individuals, killed by the Mughals, was Taru Singh, a revered personality among the Sikhs. The Sikhs subsequently built a *samadh* on the spot where Taru Singh had breathed his last and named it as Shaheed Ganj, which was subsequently converted into a Gurdwara. Before the Maharaja Ranjit Singh's assumption of power in the Punjab, when three *bhangi* sardars (Gujjar Singh, Lehna Singh and Sobha Singh) had established their writ over Lahore (1765-1799), the Sikhs occupied the mosque and the *garanthi* (priest) of the Gurdwara started using it as his residence and took rent for the shops attached to the building. The arrangement remained the same even after the annexation of the Punjab by the British in 1849.

The promulgation of the Gurdwara Act in 1925 caused a considerable change in the Shaheed Ganj scenario. That Act nullified the control of the *mahants* (priests) over the Gurudwaras and the trust properties worth crores of rupees. Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee assumed its control over the Gurudwaras as laid down in the Act. Soon after the Act was invoked the Sikh occupants of the mosque and the property attached to it, approached tribunal set up under the Act and 'prayed for exemption from this regulation under the plea that the mosque building and the attached shops were their personal property.' In these circumstances, the secretary Anjuman-i-Islamia Punjab, Syed Mohsin Shah also filed a petition claiming Anjuman's right over the mosque and the property attached to it. However, tribunal dismissed claims of both the parties and declared the mosque and the building as the property of the Gurudwara. The Sikh occupants challenged the tribunal's verdict in the High Court but Anjuman-i-Islamia did not file any appeal. A division bench of the High Court affirmed the decision of the tribunal in December 1934 and the building was transferred to the

⁶⁴ See for details Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, pp.197-209. Also see Jan Baz Mirza, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, pp.210-37, 236-65.

Lahore branch of Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in March 1935.⁶⁵

After securing the possession of the building SGPC embarked on an intensive work of renovation of the compound. As the work progressed Muslims started thronging all over the place of work, some of them came there to protest and some just to watch. One of these days when masons and labourers were busy pulling the wall down, adjacent to the mosque, a mason by the name of Mala Singh fell down and died. The news of his death was flashed in the local papers, leading to an interesting assumption by the Muslims that Mala Singh met such a sorry fate because he had been perpetrating a sinful act of demolition of mosque. Thereafter, the site drew larger crowd of Muslims and the tension mounted astronomically. Sensing the gravity of the situation the district administration intervened and averted the possibility of any untoward incident. Deputy Commissioner forbade the Sikhs to touch the mosque. He also persuaded the Muslims to disperse and posted police guard around the compound. Nevertheless the tension continued to mount despite Deputy Commissioner's assurance that the structure of the mosque would not be 'torn down until a final settlement was made.'⁶⁶ Governor Emerson also after meeting the Muslim notables agreed to consider the proposals put forward by them. But to the chagrin of the Muslims the mosque was raised to the ground by the morning of 9th July. Muslims felt cheated by the Governor and tempers rose to new heights. However nothing untoward came to pass till the 14th when a public meeting at Mochi Gate was held, Zafar Ali Khan being the main speaker. He chastised Ahrar's opportunism and said 'despite great efforts to bring the Ahrar leaders to the assemblage they had refused to come.' Thereafter the bubble of Ahrar's popularity was said to have bursted. Immediately after the meeting the enrolment of the blue shirt volunteers (*Niliposh Razakars*) began with the intention to embark upon a civil disobedience movement. Consequently four persons, Zafar Ali Khan, Syed Habib, Malik Lal Khan and Mian Ferozuddin were externed from Lahore. On the 15th July ban on the public meetings was clamped and press censorship was stiffened. The salient feature of 14th July meeting was its undermining influence on the Ahrar, particularly its electoral appeal.

The Ahrar leadership perceived Masjid-i-Shaheed Ganj issue as a conspiracy against Ahrar and Zafar Ali Khan, a principal protagonist, was accused of rabble rousing to the detriment of Ahrar. Ahrar leaders

⁶⁵ For details see Syed Nur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp.130-31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.132.

thought it as machination that was contrived just to discredit Ahrar for its indifference to the masjid that was in the occupation of the Sikhs. They also saw Zafar Ali Khan as a stooge of the Unionists who had been among the arch enemies of Ahrar.⁶⁷ After all the hype the movement had gained, in the course of which many lives were lost. However Zafar Ali Khan was interned at Karamabad and the movement tapered off. After 1935 till his death in 1956 Zafar Ali Khan did not make even a fleeting reference to Masjid-i-Shaheed Ganj issue which is unresolved even to date.

Shaheed Ganj incident remained unresolved although slogan mongering and fiery speeches of irresponsible people cost Muslims more than a dozen lives. Ahrar's popularity was drastically scuttled and never saw an upward swing again but in 1953 Khatum-i-Nabuwat movement which fall outside the purview of this paper. Shaheed Ganj issue impacted very adversely on the electoral acclaim nevertheless, its prowess to prompt agitations remained. Madeh-i-Sahaba movement in UP is a case in point.⁶⁸ That movement spurred when once Attaa Ullah Shah Bukhri while addressing a public gathering in Lucknow (a city with Shia majority among the Muslims) referred to the second caliph Umer with a suffix *Razi allaha* (may Allaha be pleased with him). Some one from the gathering told 'alluding to the first three caliphs with so much of deference is legally proscribed here in Lucknow.'⁶⁹ But Bukhari kept on quoting the companions of the Prophet reverentially. He also said, 'to respect some personality is not crime though abusing him is definitely a crime.' His speech ended peacefully and Bukhari went back to Lahore and broached that issue in the meeting of Ahrar working committee. The working committee deputed Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar to investigate the issue. The report he presented is summarized below:

Before 1905 Shias and Sunnis lived like brothers and participated in *Tazia* procession in which Hindus also took part with out any sectarian misgivings. As Shias were in majority... most of the municipal committee members adhered to *Asna Ashari* faith. It was in 1905 when split occurred between them and one faction called in a Shia *Maulvi* (religious Scholar) by the name of Maqbul Ahmed from Rampur. He exacerbated the sectarian difference. Consequently, Shia Sunni riots took place in the entire history of Lucknow. Therefore, Hindus stopped joining Muslim in *Tazia* procession. And Sunnis set up their own

⁶⁷ See for details Afzal Haq, *op.cit.*, pp.242-46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.218-43.

⁶⁹ Hafiz Taqi-ud-Din, *op.cit.*, pp.195-97.

Karbala out side the city and started taking out their own procession. To investigate Shia Sunni riots government set up a commission under a British officer Mr. Picket thereby the sectarian divide got perpetuated.⁷⁰

In these circumstances Ahrar decided to launch a movement against UP government. From the different cities of UP and Punjab Ahrar volunteers started pouring in to Lucknow. After disembarking from the trains they used to enter the city by reciting these verses:

Hain Kirnain Eik hi Mushal ki

Abu Bakar, Umer, Usman Ali

Hum Martaba Hain Yaran-e-Nabi

*Kuck Farq Nahin in Charoon Main*⁷¹

While reciting these verses they courted arrests in large numbers. Concurrently fifth Shia political conference was held in Lucknow in December 1937 that was presided over by Prince Ikram Hussain son of Awadh's last *nawab*. Resolution that was passed in that conference added further fuel to the fire in which it was said, 'we warn Government and Sunnies to respect the rights and sentiments of Shias. Our status and rights are practically ignored and *Madha-i-Sahaba* movement is anti-Shia which aims at extirpating Shia political influence.'⁷²

More than one thousands people were put in the jail, eventually the governor of UP intervened and with the help of Sunni notables of Lucknow, Majlis-e-Ahrar was persuaded to stop that movement; therefore, it was then postponed. But it resurfaced in 1939 and also kept on recurring in the 1940s as well. That movement intensified the sectarian division with in the Muslims and its impact is explicitly visible in the present state of Pakistan. the Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (1952-1990), the founder-leader of Sipah-e-Sahaba, Pakistan, was immensely inspired by the Atta Ullaha Shah Bukhari and his colleagues in Majlis-i-Ahrar. The study of Ahrar also provides us a back ground to the religious extremism and terrorism. That was quite ubiquitous in 1980s and 1990s.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.195.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.197.