

## **Maulana Azad and the Indian Freedom Struggle**

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After more than five decades since the emergence of two independent states in the subcontinent, India and Pakistan, a review of the course of freedom struggle in retrospect shows that it was multifaceted: the freedom struggle of the 1857 transformed itself into Indian freedom struggle which later bifurcated into Muslim and Indian freedom movements, representing the interests of Hindus and Muslims respectively. These movements were led by freedom fighters of varied political backgrounds and statures. The impressive list of liberation fighters include Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Allama Mohammad Iqbal, Ali brothers, Chaudri Rehmat Ali and others. Equally important is the Congress leadership, especially of the like of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan and Mualana Abul Kalam Azad.

The Pakistani historians have, so far, underscored the works and profiles of the leaders of the Muslim freedom movement, which eventually culminated in the creation of Pakistan. The effort to glorify the leaders who won independence for the Muslims, of course against heavy odds, became the major occupation for the first generation of the post-partition Pakistani historians. This approach of the Pakistani historians is debatable; two explanations are insightful in this regard: One, that research, in general, and historical research, in particular, has hardly gained encouragement here. As a result, with the exception of few genuine works, quality historical research, reflecting balanced view of our struggle for liberation from the British colonial power, and also from the Hindu domination, is yet to come forth. In addition to that, an expansion of research canvas, to come out of self-praise and exaltation, has hardly happened. This state of affairs presents a major challenge for the future historians. Second, the ideological articulation of the genesis of the country has restricted the post partition Muslim historians to focus on projecting the philosophy and achievements of the Muslim freedom, or more precisely the Pakistan movement, which was obviously

divergent, especially after the Lahore resolution of 1940, from the Indian freedom movement led by the Congress.

The presumption is that the main political difference between the two movements which caused bifurcation developed somewhere later in the day. It is understood that initially both the communities were sharing broadly the same objective i.e. to achieve liberation from the British colonial power. However later on the two communities, Hindus and the Muslims, held opposing views about the solution of the Indian problem especially in view of their experiences of the colonial period and vision of the perils of post-British political scenario of India. The Muslim League, which was the spokesman of the Indian Muslims, demanded freedom from two masters – the British colonial power and the Hindu *raj* – which kept the two freedom struggles poles apart. Despite the fact that initiatives for mutual understanding and cooperation continued till the last minute like reaching some sought of tripartite compromise under the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946.

The argument for liberation from the Hindu *raj*, as it is well known, was embedded in the ideological differences between the two communities which was, of course, deeply entrenched in their historical experiences. The difference between the two can very precisely be phrased in two ways: One that would explain the ideological difference envisage that Muslims eat cows and Hindus worship them which though look simplistic but of course trickles down not only to their religious but social, cultural and economic domains as well. It was realized that they were so different from each other in all aspects of life that they could not plan their future together under one and the same political system. This factor primarily rejuvenated the notion of two-nation theory, which eventually became the driving force responsible for the division of India. Second, the historical differentiation is explained in a way that the heroes of one nation were the villains of the other, they did not share common historical heritage either. Now here is the point why Pakistani historians find it hard to work on the politics of the Indian National Congress or its like-minded leaders. They view the Indian struggle for liberation and the leaders who projected its ends as an antagonist. Even Maulana Azad who was a Muslim but shared the political vision of the Congress, and was the staunch supporter of united India, has hardly got any favorable attention from Pakistani historians.

One reason which explains Azad's unpopularity with the Muslims, particularly Pakistani historians, is that he always preferred to be the favorite of key Congress leaders, rather than creating his own constituency among the people to claim popular leadership. In addition to that he preferred to be the Congress loyalist even at the cost of larger

interest of the Hindu Muslim unity. There is a paradox about which Azad wrote in his biography and what he did in his practical life. For him his ideal of Indian unity and the vision of mutually shared future were always secondary to his loyalty to the Congress leadership and over all political aims of the party. For instance during the formation of ministries after the 1937 elections he made a commitment with two Muslim Leaguers – Chaudri Khaliquzaman and Nawab Ismail – to be inducted in the provincial government of UP. He was, however, unable to convince Jawaharlal Nehru about it. In view of some prominent historians this aborted agreement in UP gave new life to the demand of the Muslims for the separate homeland and also infused new spirit into the Muslim League as the sole spokesman of Indian Muslims.

He also failed to sell his claimed formula for the solution of Indian problem (the famous Cabinet Mission in 1946) to his colleagues in the Congress which historians across the board considered as the last ditch effort to keep India united. The key Congress leaders including Jawaharlal and Gandhi had reservations about important provisions of the plan. Nehru, for instance, was in favor of partial acceptance of the plan though it was confirmed that the plan had to be accepted in totality, which eventually led to its failure. Though Maulana implicitly mentioned Nehru for the failure of the formula, the entire blame was put on the shoulders of the Muslim League and Jinnah's intransigence.

After the failure of Cabinet Mission Plan, and mix experiences of the interim government, Congress leaders especially Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and even Gandhi, were prepared to accept the partition of India but Maulana Azad adhered to his earlier stand. This consistent and firm position categorized him as a political idealist. Politics, however, is the name of realism; the spirit of the time, tempo of the movement, heat of the masses, exigencies of the British government and, not the least, the pressure of the Muslim League's demand for a separate homeland, were some of the factors which he missed while insisting on keeping India united.

The circumstances of that time prove that political consciousness of the Hindu and Muslim communities, in particular, and others, in general, were such that even if India remained united under the Cabinet Mission Plan it would have split into multiple autonomous units in the near future<sup>1</sup> as, under the provisions of the plan, provinces and states were allowed to secede from the union at will after a period of ten years.

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<sup>1</sup> I.H. Quraishi, *Struggle for Pakistan* (Karachi: University of Karachi, Reprinted 1984) p.249.

While analyzing the later part of the freedom movement the external factors, especially the British strategic factors, should not be ignored. The end of the second world war helped liberation struggles and led to the creation of new states. The Indian and Pakistan freedom movements were no exceptions. Following the worldwide phenomenon of liberation of nations and emergence of independent states, the coming into being of the two new states was not an unusual or unbelievable event from the global perspective. After the failure of last-ditch British efforts to keep India united, creating two dominions was considered as an alternative to serve future British strategic goals. In his biography Maulana Azad critically mentions the British acceptance of the division of India. He doubted the sincerity of the British government to keep India united after it had realized that division would serve its interest better. Any one who got convinced of the ground realities of the time and agreed to partition somehow became a traitor in the eyes of Azad. It appears that Maulana Azad either down played the significance of these factors or failed to grasp the essence of the ground realities that culminated in the division of the subcontinent.

### **Formative phase of Maulana's thought**

Maulana Azad enjoyed a heritage of scholarship by virtue of his ancestor's scholarly role in the court of Mughal rulers and thereafter. His own father was a religious scholar of repute. It was due to his scholarship that people revered him and insisted him to stay in Calcutta though he was interested to continue his living in Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>. So from his family background Maulana Azad received a quest for scholarship. His father trained him in theology and other courses about religious studies. This ancestral and educational background ensured in him an interest in pan-Islamic movements, idealizing unity of the Muslim community and their rise to power. It was this inspiration that took him to the Middle Eastern countries. He had personal meetings and interaction with leaders of the pan-Islamic movements. Reminiscences of the same ideological inspiration were visible clearly in his working committee resolutions, for instance one which he wrote in response to the Lahore Resolution of 1940 explains volumes about such sentiments. He wrote how come Muslims who ruled India for centuries would satisfy themselves by getting just a fraction of it. They have the right to rule all over India as they did in the past. They also had to join hands with other communities

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<sup>2</sup> Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, the complete version (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988), p.2.

to enjoy the proprietary of the whole of India once again<sup>3</sup>. However, perhaps, he could not realize the change of times. Joining hands with Hindus to achieve independence for united India would ensure proprietary for Hindus only, Muslims would remain as junior partners in the scheme of future power structure.

He somehow enjoyed the claim to be a revolutionary, explained in the earlier part of his biography by giving an account of some circumstantial evidence. For instance, breaking away with his parental old ways of life and adopting pseudonym 'Azad'; being impressed by Sir Syed's philosophy of modernization and learning English to understand works of English authors; visiting Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Turkey to meet Muslim reformists; getting impressed by the revolutionary philosophy of Kamal Ata Turk, and on his return, aligning himself with Hindu revolutionaries who were organizing themselves against division of Bengal.

At the time when Muslim community, being loyal to the British government, was avoiding resistance against the British at any cost, Maulana Azad was in the camp of Hindu revolutionaries. With his background of religious education and pan-Islamist ideas, joining the Hindu revolutionary camp to satisfy his proactivism appeared paradoxical. He also was impressed by Gandhi's style of leadership and remained his loyal follower till the end. Intermittently he was incarcerated by the British government along with other Congress leaders. However, between the two camps of revolutionaries – one working within the system to bring about reform, and the other resisting the system by remaining outside – he can be put in to the first category; he satisfied his inner fire by joining the bandwagon of the key Congress leaders.

### **Champion of independence for united India**

Azad was impressed by Gandhi's philosophy of the freedom struggle and he remained committed to it till the last. He remained president of Congress from 1939 to 1946. During this period he pleaded for the liberation of united India on different crucial occasions both with the British government and the Muslim League leadership especially during the 1945 Simla Conference and during parleys of the Cabinet Mission Plan. He remained so focused on his dream of attaining liberation for united India that he black-listed those he felt were trying to hamper that course. That is the only reason why he even criticized, on more than two occasions, his close comrade Jawaharlal Nehru, for being responsible for

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

alienating the Muslim masses and their representative party – the Muslim League – from sharing their future within Indian Union. More conspicuously he regretted Jawaharlal's role during the Cabinet Mission Plan. As the president of the Muslim League what Jinnah understood of the Cabinet Plan eventually convinced him to accept it. However Nehru's irresponsible statement, which meant that the clauses of the plan were liable to change by the new constituent assembly any time, enhanced the fears of the Muslim community about future constitutional safeguards. The remedial efforts of the working committee resolution at the behest of Maulana Azad failed to remove the above fears.

Despite huge mistrust between the two communities Azad made last minute efforts to convince Lord Mountbatton, just before his departure to England, to present before the British cabinet his partition plan<sup>4</sup>. He also, for the last time, asked Gandhi to take a stand for united India. Gandhi responded by offering the formula of presidentship of the Indian Union to Jinnah but by then mistrust between the two communities was unbridgeable.

### **A staunch opponent of Indian division**

Maulana Azad through out his political career fought against two forces simultaneously – the British government and, the forces such as Muslim League – which stood for the division of India. His main argument, of which he was so thoroughly convinced, was that India had a political problem; culturally and socially it shared a lot. He was of the view that any plausible formula that would accommodate all Indians particularly Hindus and the Muslims into one political unit was laudable and had to pave way for the common future of the Indian people.

For the failure of the Simla Conference of 1945 he blamed Jinnah because the political issues in his view were resolved but Jinnah raised the communal issue, which ended the conference inconclusively. He was of the view that Congress enjoyed all India representation, as it was the party of the Indians irrespective of ethnic or religious differences. On the contrary Jinnah forcefully expressed the difference between Congress and the Muslim League. He called Congress a Hindu party and Muslim League a party for the Muslim's of India. He, therefore, believed that on the Viceroy's Executive Council Congress would nominate Hindu members and Muslim League would nominate Muslim members on behalf of the Muslim community<sup>5</sup>. Maulana Azad was representing the Congress as its president at the Simla Conference

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> I.H, Quraishi, *Struggle for Pakistan*, p.288.

and was not ready to compromise the all India representative stature of his party. As a Congress leader he insisted that Congress also had the right to nominate Muslim members on the Viceroy's Council. But Jinnah put his foot down to the fact that nomination of Muslim members on the same Council was the sole prerogative of the Muslim League. As the situation ended in a deadlock, British government and the Indian political forces both looked forward to a new formula or plan for the solution of the Indian problem.

In the Cabinet Mission Plan Maulana Azad found the ultimate solution to the woes of the Indians. Basically he claimed the formulation of the plan which was modified by the Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord A.V. Alexander and Lord Pethic-Lawrence, representatives of the Labour government and members of the British cabinet who tried to resolve the Indian problem<sup>6</sup>. He was of the view that the Cabinet Mission Plan was the formula which had all the potentialities to keep India united but the irresponsible behavior of Nehru and intransigence of Jinnah doomed it into failure. Once it failed any argument or pleadings of Maulana Azad could not bring back the plan on the negotiation table for discussion and also for future consideration.

### **Predictions about the future of two neighbouring countries after partition**

Azad considered that the British government was ultimately responsible for the division of India. He argued that due to two reasons British government eventually agreed to divide India. First, due to internal and external political exigencies the Labor government was ready to hand over authority to the Indians. Second, by creating Pakistan they ensured their future strategic safety in this region. They thought that Pakistan as a small and vulnerable country would need the British support, which would provide them an opportunity to interfere in this region. India would have no option but to endorse its presence and become member of the Commonwealth. The whole contention of the Indian leadership boiled down to the understanding that British authority was falling back on its divide and rule policy. At least Maulana Azad viewed British decision to divide India in that light.

Azad was also of the view that division of India on communal grounds would translate into the structural policies of two states. They would pose perpetual threat to each other's existence rather than establishing peace in the region. He predicted large-scale violence and disturbance at the eve and in the aftermath of division. The issue of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.244.

dislocation of the immigrants on both the sides and large-scale violence, which killed and injured people in millions, proved the predictions of the Maulana true. It strengthened hatred between the two communities on permanent grounds. The untold stories of atrocities became part of the historical memory of both which has created adversarial mindset. The account of the dislocated and vulnerable Muslims who took refuge in his house was a vivid case in point. The kind of hardships they had gone through was unbelievable. Gandhi's fast until death for securing safety of the Muslims all over and particularly in Delhi reinforced Gandhi's charisma in Maulana's mind. In the long term also he feared that Muslims, as minority in India, and Hindus, as minority in Pakistan, would be used as hostage by the one against the other for achieving their respective political ends. This prediction unfortunately proved true at times, such as the Gujrat massacre of the Muslim community in 2002 and the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. His forecasting about the political consequences of the division too, unfortunately, proved correct. The two arch rivals have invested immense resources in building defense capabilities to dominate the other. Worst of all they have achieved nuclear capability, endangering the lives of their people.

### **Conclusion**

Indian freedom struggle was a combination of multiple factors with many ups and downs. So the rhetorical arguments based on superficial analogies can lead to very subjective conclusions. The process of socio-cultural assimilation and religio-philosophical movements for mutual harmony and coexistence are equally valuable to be underscored. An experience of hundreds of years of togetherness and peaceful living is an indelible aspect of the history of subcontinent which should not be ignored. Later political divergences between the Hindus and Muslims have to be taken on the face value and the wider backdrop of wonderful socio-cultural and historical experiences which made the hallmark of Maulana Azad's argument should not be ignored.

There is huge room for carrying out research on a broader scale to understand the struggle for liberation of both sides, that is of the Congress and the Muslim League. That is the only way to reach broader understating of the partition problem and also to reach unbiased conclusions. On the broader level it would of course help the peace process which is presently underway and would hopefully bear fruitful results.