

Mawlana Azad and Commencement of Modern Era in India

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Abstract

Speaking of India as 'a vibrant society with its increasing influence in the world' and 'Bright Future of India' is meaningless unless we discuss the personality and thoughts of Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), one of the pioneers of modern India. Mawlana Azad revered by Muslims and non-Muslims alike was a great and undisputed revolutionary thinker, a determinant freedom fighter and one of the makers of modern India. Acquainted with both traditional and modern education, Azad was 'a man of luminous intelligence and mighty intellect with an amazing capacity to pierce through a problem to its core'. Being a profound theologian, an eloquent speaker and a prolific writer, he attached great importance to communal harmony and believed that Hindu-Muslim unity was an essential element for bringing freedom and is equally important for making 'progressive and developed India' in future. His writings and speeches had a deeply religious tenor and were marked by his artistic, highly personalized diction, appealing into intuition rather than discursive reason. His vision of Islam, Qur'an-based universal humanism, continues to inspire Muslim sensitivity. A man with pragmatic outlook, Azad inspired his contemporaries and continues to inspire the generations to come.

This paper is an attempt to explore the vision and thought of Azad which were inevitable in laying down the foundation of modern India. The paper is framed in such a manner so that the present generation is inspired with his personality and mission and, thus, works accordingly for the betterment of the people without any religious discrimination. To highlight his policies and principles present in his writings and speeches not excluding the literature written about him is also necessary to explore, for these draw attention towards the purpose how our ancestors were steadfast, sincere and undaunted in their policies and principles and unlike present leaders 'they meant what they said'.

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Introduction

More than a half century ago the people of India, in the post-independent era, managed to liberate themselves from the shackles of imperialism and got the opportunity to have a free choice of selecting their destiny. The current day progressive scenario of India demonstrates the determined and unparalleled efforts of its leaders of great mettle who endeavoured to establish the country on the ways of progress and development. Muhiuddin Ahmad *alias* Mawlanaa Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), was among such top-brass intellectuals, (Douglas, 1988, 1) who received the applaud of his contemporary, Jawahar Lal Nehru, as he was ‘a man of luminous intelligence and mighty intellect with an amazing capacity to pierce through a problem to its core’ (Kashayp, 1989, 25).

Being a profound theologian, an eloquent speaker and a prolific writer, he attached great importance to communal harmony. Besides he believed that multi-ethnic, cultural and religious unity was an essential for the liberation of India and its subsequent progress and development. His writings and speeches had a profound religious tenor and were marked by his artistic, highly personalized diction, appealing into intuition rather than discursive reason. His vision of Islam, Qur’an-based universal humanism, continues to inspire Muslim sensitivity in particular and the whole humanity in general (Troll, 2014, 119). Thus, Azad, a man with pragmatic outlook, inspired his contemporaries and continues to inspire the generations to come.

The current-day religio-political and socio-cultural scenario of India makes the application of ideas of Mawlana Azad not only relevant but also inevitable for the materialization of an environment conducive for the pro-longed progress and development of India in future.

Mawlana Azad: A Visionary Scholar

Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad is undoubtedly one of the architects of modern secular India who occupies a special place in the Indian History. A creative thinker acquainted with

both traditional and modern education, Mawlana Azad laid an undying impact on the educational aspects of modern India (Abduhu, 1973). His unique analysis of socio-cultural ethos of the country and his efforts to maintain and preserve it display his significance as a visionary of the country. Unlike his contemporaries, he upheld unique views and approaches towards socio-political problems of Indian sub-continent (Tirmzi, 1991). He discussed at length, in his speeches and writings, national life, its problems and their solutions. His analytical and critical approach in studying the past helped him to affirm the fact that history repeats itself. According to him the situations India faced at the time of her freedom struggle can be confronted again in modern perspective if its citizens follow the same course of the history. He maintains in one of his speeches, “What has happened once will happen time and again, and what one person has experienced, will be experienced by all who follow a similar course” (Shahabuddin, 2007, 30). To substantiate his opinion regarding the uniformity of laws of social life, he quotes Abdul Rahman Ibn Khalduan, a historian-philosopher of the thirteenth century, who formulated the principles of the philosophy of history, as, “if we omit the date and names, then the history of one nation or era can be substituted for any and every nation and time. For men and dates constitute the only difference in the histories of different nations” (*Ibid.*, 31). This truism is valid even today as it was valid in ancient times and in the time of Mawlana Azad. The history teaches us lessons how nations rise and fall. Today when nation(s) follow the principles adopted by the leading and developed nations of the world, will definitely rise and those which follow the opposite course are doomed to be destroyed. But while comparing the situations of one nation with the other(s) or the present conditions with the past, needs due assessment otherwise the problems instead of being solved would be augmented. That is why Mawlana Azad believed that one cannot reach the accurate solution for the problem unless he makes its accurate assessment because inaccurate assessment of the existing problems may result in another crisis. He said: “If we underestimate the problems we face, we may become negligent, and if we take an exaggerated view we may find ourselves plunged in despair. We should neither be negligent nor scared” (*Ibid.*, 30).

Political Career

Mawlana Azad—revered by Muslims and non-Muslims alike—was a great revolutionary thinker and a determinant freedom fighter (Chopra, 1988, 72-101). He was essentially a religious scholar but his intellectual acumen directed him to respond to the circumstances. Thus, he began his political career by actively participating in politics and the freedom struggle of India. He used to say: “I did not go after the tumult of political life; political commotions themselves searched me out” (Nizami, 2009, 1). Throughout his political career, there was a consistency in his thought and behavior. Polemics, personal rebukes or retributions never found his interests and his ideological steadfastness made him outspoken, candid and fearless. He went through the scholarship of many scholars like Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1888) among others which helped him to know modern knowledge and other national developments whether anti-British or anti-Ottoman (Douglas, 1988, 86). With his own experience synthesized the ideas of Iranian and Arab nationalists which he confronted during his visit to West Asia (Troll, 2014, 118). At the time of partition of Bengal (1905), the revolutionaries of Bengal were hostile to the Muslims for they believed British Government was using the Muslims against India’s political struggle and considered them an obstacle in the attainment of freedom and must, like other obstacles be removed (Azad, 1959, 4; cf. Azad, 2003, 18). It was Mawlana Azad who amply wiped out all such misconceptions by joining the agitation against the partition of Bengal (*Ibid*). Such misconceptions and misgivings against Muslims still exist in the country, though with different approaches and are detrimental to the solidarity of the country. Thus, Mawlana Azad’s ideas of communal solidarity need a pragmatic approach to bridge the gap among the diverse communal denominations of India. This was really the courage of Mawlana Azad who successfully and pragmatically made Hindus to believe that Muslims are not their enemies rather brothers who stood and are standing for the cause of nation-building on progressive lines. Strengthening the Hindu-Muslim unity to expedite the freedom struggle was his primary concern (*Ibid*). His own work, *India Wins Freedom* (1959), reveals the developments in his political career and is full of inspiration for present generation. The book

also evinces his vehement and consistent struggle for safeguarding the unity and solidarity of India while opposing its partition.

In the post-freedom scenario, Azad served as the first Education Minister of Free-India for whom Saeed Naficy, an eminent Persian scholar wrote, “how fortunate is the country and the government that has such a wise and able Minister of Education” (Nizami, 2009, 85). The credit of building the educational structure of independent India goes to Azad, who vehemently struggled for inculcation of a lively sense of rights and duties of citizenship. Realization of rights, duties and the spirit of democracy, as per Azad, are imperative for establishing a prosperous and healthy society. He was moved throughout his tenure of Ministership by the motive that: “the essence of a secular and democratic state is freedom of opportunity for the individual without regard to race, religion, caste or community” (Nizami, 2009, 85). Mawlana Azad while discussing the features of free-India, maintained:

If there is any one feature which distinguishes modern India, it is the growth of the spirit of democracy which seeks to give equality of opportunity to all its citizens. All past barriers based on birth, privilege, caste or wealth are breaking down. As a secular democratic State, we are pledged to the widening of opportunities and equality of chances for all. (Habib, 2010, 8-9)

Mawlana Azad saw various crucial stages of political commotions especially when he was elected President of the Indian National Congress, a second time (March 17, 1940—July 7, 1946). As Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

Never before has India had to face more difficult problems, in the national and international field than today (Nizami, 2009, 30)... He has been a tower of strength to us and to the country and whether one agreed with him or not, we always knew that his opinion mattered and could never be lightly brushed aside. For behind that opinion lay a keen and well-trained mind, knowledge of the past and of the present, and ripe wisdom which is given to few (*Ibid.*, 31).

Paying tribute to his statesmanship and dedication, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel said in 1945:

Anyone else in his position might not have been able to show the courage and determination with which he bore the responsibilities of this great office for six long years. The credit for bringing us to the present position in our struggle for independence goes entirely to Mawlana Azad. (Nizami, 2009, 30)

Inevitability of Education in the Modern Era

Education is the most important way of achieving progress in the modern era. With his prudence Mawlana Azad realized the importance of this fact that stirred him to bring India among the respectful members of international community. Giving special stress on the teaching of modern sciences, he, as an Education Minister of free India, established a chain of scientific laboratories and institutes and expanded the facilities for education in science and technology (Nizami, 2009, 83-109). Without gender discrimination he struggled to reconstruct the educational edifice of free India and ensured a bright future for the youth of the country. He was as concerned about the education of girls as of boys and used to say “educated mothers will mean children who can be easily made literate” (*Ibid.*, 106). While emphasizing on the importance of imparting instruction in modern sciences and knowledge, he observed that “no programme of national education can be appropriate if it does not give full consideration to the education and advancement of one-half of the society—that is the women” (Habib, 2010, 9).

While developing his educational policies he was much concerned with the demand of the time and thus, extended the scope of research work without which, he believed there can be no advance in industry of technology (Nizami, 2009, 95). While discussing the problems of education that still exist in the education system, he said: “Today our universities are like factories which are turning out products that do not conform to the demands of the society in either number or quality. It is therefore necessary to carry out changes in higher education.” (*Ibid.*, 107). Keeping in view the requirements of the society and in order to make the university products easily absorbable in different fields he laid emphasis on higher education

in the fields of agriculture, medicine, engineering, technology and science. Mawlana Azad believed that progressive education will greatly address the major social evils and will help in fortifying the secular and liberal fabric, plural nature and democratic ethos of India (Habib, 2010, 11). By making such policies and provisions in the field of education, he observed that, “We want in India of future, men and women of vision, courage and honesty of purpose, who will be able to play their part worthily in every field of national activity” (*Ibid.*, 8).

Mawlana Azad and Communal Solidarity

Mawlana Azad’s struggle towards establishing a united country can be comprehended from Dr. S. Radhakrishnan:

National spirit was a driving force of his life. He was an apostle of national unity and communal harmony, the lessons which we have to remember even now, since there are forces which are still at work in this country to divide us from one another (Nizami, 2009, 31).

Ceaseless was his struggle to maintain the cultural identity of India and preserve its historic traditions of catholicity and co-existence. In his presidential address to Indian National Congress on 15th December, 1923 he maintains:

Today, if an angel were to descend from the heaven and declare from the top of Qutb Minar, that India will get Swaraj within twenty-four hours, provided she relinquishes Hindu-Muslim unity, I will relinquish Swaraj rather than give up Hindu-Muslim unity. Delay in the attainment of Swaraj will be a loss to India, but if our unity is lost, it will be a loss for entire mankind. (Shahabuddin, 2007, 42)

Mawlana Azad was very much influenced by the teachings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and used to quote him frequently in his writings as well as in speeches. To symbolize the Hindu-Muslims unity he quoted a beautiful metaphor of Sir Syed that ‘Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes on Mother India’s face’(Shahabuddin, 2007, 134). While addressing convocation at A.M.U. on Feb 20, 1949, he related Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s address to an association of Hindus at Lahore in which he said, “I am sorry that you have restricted in this

manner the application of the term 'Hindu'. You have applied it to a particular religious group. But to my mind this application is wrong. I count as Hindus all those who are inhabitants of this country whatever be their religion or race. This is the reason why I take pride in the fact that I am a Hindu”(Ibid.). After quoting this idea Mawlana Azad maintained that “If the Hindus and Muslims of India had understood that spirit of this teaching and followed it, the whole course of recent events would have taken a different turn” (Ibid.). Mawlana Azad also maintained that the essence of Indian civilization and culture has always been a spirit of assimilation and synthesis and unity in diversity has been her motto throughout the ages (Nizami, 2009, 38). He referred the mingling of the two cultural traditions in these words:

Like the Ganga and Jamuna, they flowed for a while through separate courses, but nature’s immutable law brought them together and joined them in a Sangam.(Ibid.)

All such illustrations and efforts of Mawlana Azad were meant for eradication of mutual conflicts caused by communalism. In his famous address to All India Muslim Convention in 1948, Mawlana Azad vehemently stressed to bury communalism once and for all which he believed has entered by many doors with different denominations. He argued that communalism is poison for the country today and in the future (Shahabuddin, 2007, 115-120). But, instead of burying communalism once and for all, it has spread just like a fire in the forest. Today the so-called politicians for their vested interests divide the community on the name of religion or on the basis of party interests (Ibid.).

Mawlana Azad was strongly opposed to the concept of partition for he believed that such a partition would never solve the communal problems but would make it more intense and harmful. However, to eradicate such threats and other troubles, Mawlana Azad argued that ‘it is to the interest of India and Pakistan that they should develop friendly relations and act in cooperation with one another for any other courses of action can lead only to greater troubles, sufferings and misfortune’ (Shahabuddin, 2007, 90).

Conclusion

Impact and influence is a natural consequence of a visionary's contribution like Mawlana Azad, who likely exercised a profound and inspirational impact on the Indian populace. Having left no stone unturned in building the national edifice, his selfless commitment led him to bear all the sufferings for the realization of communal solidarity and freedom of the country. Unity, discipline and confidence in leadership, as the main principles of success, receive a strong consideration in Azad's thought and vision. Materialization of India as a well-developed nation is possible only through union, solidarity and communal harmony, believed Azad. He developed the educational policies that were inevitable in laying down the foundation of modern India. This was devised to make India a centre of all intellectual and scientific developments in the world.

Mawlana Azad should be brought into limelight before the coming generations of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation like India, so as to derive inspiration from his vision, thought and multifaceted contribution in service of his nation.

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