



Research Article

## Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and the Indian Freedom Movement: Nationalism, Intellectual Leadership, and Political Vision

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### Abstract

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) was one of the greatest intellectuals and political leaders of the Indian freedom movement. A distinguished Islamic scholar, journalist and nationalist, he played a crucial role in defining the ideological direction of this struggle of India against British colonial rule. This study looks at Azad's role in the nationalist thought, the role that Azad played in the major movements like the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements and his leadership of the Indian National Congress, being its youngest president in 1923 and subsequently leading the party in the crucial years of 1940-1946.

The paper also emphasises Azad's intellectual influence in his journalism, particularly through publications such as *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Balagh*, which mobilised the Muslim participation in the nationalist movement. It further analyses his commitment towards composite nationalism and his view against communal politics and partition. The study argues that Azad's ideas and leadership made a significant contribution to Indian nationalism and that they remained influential in the process of nation-building in independent India.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) was one of the greatest intellectual and political leaders of the freedom movement in India. A great statesman, journalist, and scholar, Azad played an important role in the ideological foundations of Indian nationalism and, after independence, made significant contributions to the development of India's educational system. Born in Mecca as Mohiyuddin Ahmad in 1888, he was given a conventional education in the Islamic sciences, Arabic and Persian by his father and other scholars (Shihabuddin, 1991). From an early age, Azad showed great signs of intellectual ability and by his teenage years had started contributing articles to journals and later founded his own publication, *Lisan al-Sidq* (Tara Chand, 1972). His intellectual outlook was also influenced by reformist thinkers and classical Islamic scholars, including Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, whose works shaped his approach to religious and intellectual discourse (Kumar, 1991).

Azad's development of political consciousness was due to an intellectual world and exposure to reform movements around the world. His travels in countries like Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey made him come across the reformist and anti-colonial ideas of Jamaluddin Afghani and Muhammad Abduh (Azad, 1992). These experiences, which Azad gained, strengthened his commitment to anti-colonial nationalism and intellectual reform. Upon his return to India, Azad took an active role in nationalist politics and opposed such colonial policies as the partition of Bengal in 1905. Through his powerful Urdu journals *Al-Hilal* and later *Al-Balagh*, he tried to arouse the political consciousness of the Indian Muslims and to promote their involvement in the wider nationalist movement (Hameed, 1990; Nizami, 1990). The publishing of *Al-Hilal* in 1912 produced a profound influence on the Muslim intellectual circles and became an important platform for the nationalist ideas (Nehru, 1981).

Azad was always in favour of a concept of composite nationalism based upon unity between India's various religious groups. As a key leader of the Indian National Congress, he had played a critical role in the mobilisation against British colonial rule and the strengthening of the nationalist movement. After independence, Azad was the first minister of Education of India, where he worked on developing educational institutions and educational policies aimed at expanding the availability of education and cultural and intellectual growth in the newly independent country (Ahmad, 2024; Britannica, 2024). Nevertheless, historians have also discussed some aspects of Azad's political legacy, especially due to his opposition to the partition of India and the long-term consequences of his educational policies (Mukherjee, 2019; *Swarajya Magazine*, 2020).

## 2. Journalism and the Intellectual Leadership

### 2.1 Early Journalistic Career

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad started his journey in the field of journalism at a very young age. His early publications were *Nairang-e-Alam* (1899) and a weekly called *Al-Misbah* (1900).

Although these journals did not last long, they proved to be Azad's early intellectual skills and his interest in public discourse. His first major journal, *Lisan-ul-Sidq* (1903-1905), made him a promising writer and thinker in Muslim intellectual circles (Hameed, 1990).

### 2.2 Scholarly Journal Association

Azad's intellectual growth received a further boost from the association that he developed with the great scholar Shibli Nomani. He helped edit *Al-Nadwa*, the journal of *Nadwat-ul-Ulema*, which concerned itself with Islamic theology and debates of learning. Later, he edited his own newspaper, known as *Vakil*, where he wrote articles about political developments in India and the Muslim world, gaining more influence and circulation for the newspaper (Kumar, 1991).

### 2.3 Al-Hilal and Political Journalism

Azad's journalistic venture that remained the most important was the Urdu weekly, *Al-Hilal*, which he founded in 1912. The newspaper chose a combination of literary excellence and strong political commentary, and urged Indian Muslims to become active in the nationalist movement. Through *Al-Hilal*, Azad criticised British colonialism and stressed Hindu-Muslim unity in the fight for freedom (Mukherjee, 2019; Britannica, 2024).

### 2.4 Al-Balagh and Publications of Later Times

After *Al-Hilal* was banned by the British government in 1914, Azad started another newspaper, *Al-Balagh*, in 1915. Like its predecessor, it still promoted nationalist ideas and Islamic ethical principles. In spite of the censorship and government repression, Azad's journalism played an important role in spreading political awareness and strengthening the anti-colonial movement.

### 2.5 Intellectual Influence

Through his newspapers and writings, Azad became one of the influential public intellectuals. His journalism was a great weapon in rousing political consciousness and inspiring the Indian Muslims to participate in the national movement. His intellectual leadership aided the linkage of the ideas of Islamic reformists with the broader objectives of Indian nationalism (Zaman, 2017).

## 3. Role in Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement

### 3.1 Maulana Azad and the Khilafat Movement

#### 3.1.1 Background of the Khilafat Movement

The Khilafat Movement (1919-1924) was started by Indian Muslims in response to the treatment of the Ottoman Empire by the British following the First World War to defend the position of the Caliph, who was seen as the religious leader of the Muslims around the world. The movement was led by the prominent leaders such as Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad also played an important role in this movement and emerged as a respected

leader amongst the Indian Muslims. As a scholar, writer and powerful speaker, Azad became a leading voice to many young Muslims and helped to shape public opinion in favour of the movement.

### 3.1.2 Azad's Intellectual and Political Impact

Azad's influence grew during the Khilafat Movement as he was able to mix religious authority with a very strong nationalist outlook. Mahatma Gandhi felt him to be an important link between Hindus and Muslims and that his popularity among Muslims could help strengthen national unity in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Similarly, the Ali brothers depended on the intellectual influence of Azad to allow for the Khilafat Movement to gain more credibility and appeal to the educated Muslim youth. His involvement also helped in the growth of support of Indian National Congress among Muslim communities.

### 3.1.3 Participation in Khilafat Conferences

Azad took an active part in Khilafat conferences and political campaigns. He presided over the Khilafat Conference held in Calcutta in February 1920, wherein a resolution was passed boycotting British goods and encouraging cooperation with the non-Muslim countrymen in the national struggle (Sen, 1994). Later, addressing the All-India Khilafat conference at Kanpur in 1926, he suggested that the Khilafat committees make a close tie-up with the Congress and support the national programmes for freedom. Azad believed that political developments in Muslim countries like Egypt, Iran and Turkey were inspiring the Indians to strengthen their struggle for democracy and independence (Azad, 1992).

## 3.2 Maulana Azad and Non-Cooperation Movement

### 3.2.1 Support to Non-Cooperation Movement of Gandhi

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad also played an important role in the Non-Cooperation Movement, which Mahatma Gandhi launched in 1920. He was a great supporter of Gandhi's strategy of non-violent resistance against British rule and took an active role in mobilising both Hindus and Muslims for the cause of nationalism. Through his speeches and his writings in newspapers like *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Balagh*, Azad exhorted the Indians to boycott the British institutions, schools, courts and goods and to depend on their own strength to win independence.

### 3.2.2 Connecting Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements

Azad's leadership helped to strengthen the link between the Khilafat Movement and the Non-Cooperation Movement, and the freedom struggle was transformed into a mass movement. His popularity among Muslims helped Gandhi to gain popular support from other communities on a wider basis and aided Hindu-Muslim unity in the nationalist struggle.

### 3.2.3 Reaction to the Withdrawal of the Movement

When, suddenly, after the incident of Chauri-Chaura in 1922, Gandhi withdrew the Non-Cooperation Movement, Azad was

greatly disappointed. He believed that the movement had reached its zenith and has success to awaken political consciousness all over the country.

### 3.2.4 Persistence in the Commitment to National Unity

Despite his disappointment, Azad was committed to the principles of non-violence that Gandhi had championed and continued to work towards the cause of unity of the country. This period was an important turning point in his political career, and he felt that he should concentrate on the long-term strategies for strengthening the nationalist movement and bringing about unity among Indians. His role in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements played a significant role in mobilising the Muslims in the freedom struggle and in strengthening the concept of Hindu-Muslim unity in the Indian struggle for independence.

## 4. Leadership In Indian National Congress

### 4.1 Emergence as a National Leader

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad holds his own position among the leading personalities of the freedom struggle in India. A rare combination of profound scholarship, intellectual genius and political activism, Azad became one of the most influential leaders of modern India. His early education in Arabic, Persian, philosophy, mathematics and Islamic theology influenced his intellectual attitude, while his knowledge of political developments in West Asia encouraged him to take an active part in the anti-colonial struggle. Through his journal *Al-Hilal*, which he started in 1912, Azad appealed to Indian Muslims to overcome political passivity and join with other communities in the national movement against British rule.

### 4.2 First Presidency of the Indian National Congress (1923)

Maulana Azad's political power in the nationalist movement continued to grow, and he was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1923 at the young age of thirty-five, the youngest individual to become the President of the Congress. His presidency symbolised the commitment of Congress to the concept of inclusive nationalism and testified to the important role played by Muslim leaders in that organisation. Azad also presided over several conferences for the promotion of communal harmony and the strengthening of the nationalist unity. His speeches during this period stressed the need for cooperation between Hindus and Muslims in the fight for independence.

### 4.3 Political Context and Congress–League Relations

By the late 1930s, relations between the Indian National Congress and All-India Muslim League had strained. After the provincial elections of 1937, the Congress formed governments in some provinces, but the Muslim League could not have such success. Disagreements on the political representation and demands for separate electorates worsened the relationship between the two organisations. The League accused the Congress ministries of fostering majoritarian policies, whereas the Congress leadership complained that communal politics

weakened the national struggle. These developments contributed to increasing political polarisation and eventually gave strength to Pakistan's demand.

#### **4.4 Second Presidency and Leadership (1940-1946) in the Struggle for Freedom**

In March 1940, when the political situation was at its worst, Maulana Azad was elected President of the Indian National Congress for the second time. He presided over the Ramgarh Session in 1940, in which he bitterly opposed the Two-Nation Theory and emphasized the unity of India based on its centuries-old common history and cultural interaction. His presidential address highlighted the fact that Indian Muslims had a separate religious identity, but were also an inseparable part of the Group of the big Indian nation.

Azad's leadership during the Second World War as well as the last years of the freedom movement placed him at the centre of national decision making. As Congress President, he took the party through the trying years of political repression during the Quit India Movement (1942) during which many Congress leaders were imprisoned. After their release Azad played an important role in negotiations with the British government including with the Cabinet Mission, in 1946 in relation to India's constitutional future.

#### **4.5 Vision of National Unity**

Throughout his leadership in the congress Azad always advocated the notion of composite nationalism and was deeply opposed to the idea of communal division. He regarded that Hindus and Muslims had a common history and the unity of India could not be broken by artificial political divisions. His speeches and writings stressed the importance of cooperation between the various communities as the key to the future of India.

#### **4.6 Contribution to Nation Building**

After the independence of India in 1947, Azad continued to contribute to the development of the country as the first Minister of Education. In this role he was involved in the establishment of significant cultural and educational institutions and the promotion of policies that would promote the strengthening of scientific research, higher education and cultural cooperation. His efforts reflected the same ideals of unity, intellectual development and national development which had guided his leadership in the freedom struggle.

Thus, the leadership of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in the Indian National Congress played an important part in influencing the political direction of the nationalist movement. Through his intellectual vision, commitment to unity and active involvement in political negotiations, he contributed to the cause of Indian political destiny during one of the most crucial periods of India's quest to achieve independence.

### **5. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: Composite and Pluralist India**

#### **5.1 Vision of Composite Nationalism**

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was not only one of the leaders of the freedom struggle in India but he was one of the main architects of the modern India. His political philosophy was based on the concept of composite nationalism; in which he laid emphasis on the fact that India's strength was in its cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. Azad believed that Indian civilization was the outcome of several centuries of interaction between different traditions, especially between Islamic and Hindu cultures. Therefore, he was very much opposed to communal politics and he argued that Hindus and Muslims were one nation with a common historical destiny. His commitment to the concept of pluralism influenced his political thought as well as his contribution to nation-building after independence.

#### **5.2 Intellectual Basis of Azad's Vision of Education**

Azad's intellectual outlook was influenced by the Islamic and the modern philosophical traditions. Among the early influences on his thought was the famous Muslim historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun whose views inspired Azad into a critical examination of traditional methods of education. Azad insisted that there was a stagnation in religious as well as secular learning due to blind acceptance of traditional theology and a rigid curriculum. He was convinced that education was the best way to reform the intellectual life and revive Muslim society.

Another important influence was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, whose propaganda for modern education and scientific learning influenced Azad to realize the importance of modern knowledge. At the same time, Azad was also inspired by the Islamic reformers such as Jamaluddin Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, who urged Muslims to adopt scientific and technical education while staying true to Islamic values. By creativity synthesizing these different intellectual traditions Azad developed a broad educational philosophy which combined Islamic ethics, modern science and nationalist ideals.

#### **5.3 Education as the Basis of Nation-Building**

Azad considered education as the most important instrument of national development. He argued that planning education on a national basis was even more important than planning for the economy or industry because education determined the intellectual and moral character of society. He criticized the narrow curriculum of the traditional madrasas for not teaching subjects such as mathematics and science which he considered critical for modern progress. At the same time, he and emphasized that education must develop independent thinking, creativity, and intellectual freedom.

Azad was also influenced by Western educational ideas, especially the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who stressed on the natural evolution of human potential and the importance of freedom in education. Azad respected the advancements of the western countries in the field of elementary education and considered that universal primary education was necessary for the development of Indian society.

#### 5.4 Promotion of Culture, Arts and Heritage

For Azad, there was no separation between education and culture and the arts. He kept repeating that a truly national system of education has to develop aesthetic sensibility and cultural awareness. According to Azad, art was essential in developing human emotions and moral values. While inaugurating an art exhibition in New Delhi he said that art was an integral part of national education as it brought in the human faculty of appreciation of beauty and creativity.

His commitment to culture was also extended to the field of music and the performing arts. Azad took a personal interest in the promotion of Indian classical music and he believed that the institutions such as All India Radio should maintain high standards in programming in the cultural sphere. His involvement on these cultural matters was an extension of his general belief that national development had to be accompanied by intellectual, artistic and cultural enrichment.

#### 5.5 Institutionalization of Cultural and Educational institutions

As the first Minister of Education of the Independent India, Azad played an important role in establishing great cultural and educational institutions. During the 1950s he was responsible for the creation of several important academies; the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Lalit Kala Akademi and the Sahitya Akademi and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). These institutions were to preserve and promote India's various artistic and cultural traditions.

Azad saw that cultural institutions must not be under too much government control. He contended that though government could offer financial aid and provide a conducive environment for cultural activities, the real development of literature, art, and culture is the responsibility of creative people and communities of intellectuals.

#### 5.6 Azad's Legacy of Pluralism

Maulana Azad's contributions were not limited to politics alone but also extended to the fields of education, science and culture. Guided by an egalitarian Islamic spirit and commitment to national unity, he worked for democratizing education and encouraging intellectual progress across the social and religious boundaries. His efforts were responsible for laying the foundation of a modern educational system and also helped to institutionalize the cultural heritage of India.

Thus, it can be seen that Azad's vision of composite and pluralist India is one of his most enduring legacies. By propagating the theme of unity in diversity and integrating Islamic, Indian and western intellectual traditions, he played a major role in the formulation of the ideological and institutional framework of independent India.

### 7. Contribution to the Independent India

#### 7.1 First Minister of Education

After the independence of India in 1947, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad became the first Minister of Education in Government of India and served in this post till his death in 1958. In this

capacity, he played an important role in defining the foundations of the country's modern educational system. Azad believed education to be vital for the national progress and social transformation. He strongly promoted universal and free primary education and the need for expansion of higher education and scientific research in the newly independent country.

#### 7.2 Advancement of Higher Education and Scientific Institutions

Azad was very much interested in strengthening the higher education in India. Under his leadership several important institutions and initiatives were developed for the promotion of research, science and technical education. He patronized the development of universities and promoted the creation of institutions which can contribute to the scientific and technological development of India. Azad also contributed substantially to strengthening the role of organizations like the University Grants Commission (UGC) for the better and coordinated quality of higher education in the country.

#### 7.3 Promotion of Culture and National Heritage

Maulana Azad believed that cultural development was a necessary element in national development. To promote Indian art, literature and culture he helped provide major cultural institutions like the Sahitya Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi during the 1950s. These institutions were established to preserve and promote India's rich cultural heritage and to support the artists, writers and scholars from all over the country.

In addition to this, Azad also established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to promote cultural exchange between India and other countries. Through this institution, he wanted to ensure that India strengthens its cultural diplomacy and helps popularise mutual understanding amongst different civilizations.

#### 7.4 Advocacy of Scientific and Secular Education

Azad was a firm believer that for the development of modern India, it was necessary to have a scientific outlook and a secular and inclusive educational system. In his speech, he stressed the importance of integrating the knowledge of science with that of cultural and moral values. His policies promoted technical education and scientific research, which was necessary for the economic and industrial development of India.

### 8. CONCLUSION

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad holds a distinguished position in the history of the freedom struggle in India and intellectual foundations of modern India. As a scholar, journalist and political leader he made great contributions to the nationalist movement by advocating for unity, secularism and resistance against colonial rule. His leadership in the Indian National Congress, especially in the most important years of the struggle for independence, was characteristic of his firm belief in the ideals of composite nationalism and in democratic values.

Next to the political sphere, Azad also played a crucial role in the development of the framework of educational and cultural life of independent India. As the first Minister of Education of the country, he emphasized on the importance of modern education, Scientific Development and cultural preservations for the country's progress. The institutions and policies that he has laid the foundations for India's intellectual and cultural growth were formed under his guidance.

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