

Attitude of Muslim League Towards the Demand for Self-Government in India

JAIVEER S. DHANKHAR

Professor

Department of History and Archaeology, M.D. University, Rohtak (Haryana) India

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The Muslims in India did not have an all-India political organization of their own until 1906. The idea of having such an organization was often mooted, but did not materialize chiefly due to the lack of a strong and numerous middle class among them and to the personal rivalries among their leaders. It was the growing strength of the Congress, the attention paid to it by the Government after the coming into power of a Liberal Ministry in England in December 1905, and the knowledge that a further instalment of reforms was under consideration which spurred the Muslim leaders to action and organize the All-India Muslim League in December 1906.

The two main objectives of the League were 'to promote among the Mussalmans of India feelings of loyalty to the British Government' and 'to protect and advance... [their] political rights and interests'¹.

Following the lines laid down by Syed Ahmed Khan in the eighties of the 19th century, the League disfavoured not only the Congress method of agitation, but its ideal of self-government for India on the colonial model. Syed Ahmed Khan appealed frankly to the fears, prejudices and self-interest of his co-religionists in order to keep them away from the Congress. He assured them that the demands of the Congress were inimical to their interests, that competitive examinations and representative institutions would, if allowed, only increase the predominance of the Hindus in the services and the legislatures. He characterized the proposals of the Congress as 'monstrous and unreasonable'², 'unrealizable and impossible'³.

Sailing in the same direction Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk⁴,

one of the prominent leaders of the League, advised the youth of his community early in 1907 to eschew 'the agitational politics of the Congress'⁵. The President of the League, session of 1908, Syed Ali Imam, accused the Congress of seeking 'not reform but revolution'⁶ and denounced its objective of Swaraj as 'an almost impossible ideal'⁷.

'Throughout the troubled years 1907-1910', said the Montagu-Chemsford Report, 'the Muhammadans, with a few un-important exceptions, held severely aloof from the revolutionary movement, and retained their traditional attitude of sturdy loyalty, secure in the feeling - which the partition of Bengal and the concession of communal representation in the reforms of 1909 had strengthened, that their interests were safe in the hands of the Government'⁸. But simultaneously it marked the turning point in the Muslim attitude, since 1911 their attitude has been growing far less quiescent'⁹, and went on to enumerate the causes which contributed to this change.

The year 1911 is generally recognized as marking a turning point in the Muslim attitude towards the British Government, it is not difficult to detect signs of the coming change earlier. Indian Muslims, like their co-religionists elsewhere, had been affected by the Pan-Islam movement which began towards the end of the nineteenth century¹⁰. Through its emphasis on the solidarity of Islam and opposition to Western encroachments on Muslim states, Pan-Islamism began to acquire an anti-Christian and anti-imperialist character.

With the growth of Western education amongst the Muslims, the sympathies of the younger generation

naturally turned towards the Congress and nationalist movement.

It was, however, not English education, but English foreign policy, which shook the foundations of Muslim loyalty to the British Government in India. One of the main considerations which had made the Indian Muslims loyal to the British Raj was that the latter was friendly towards the Muslim states, especially Turkey. The continued deterioration in the relations between England and Turkey ever since the last decade of the nineteenth century had given the Indian Muslims cause for anxiety. The course of British foreign policy continued to aggravate the anxieties of the Indian Muslims. In 1911, when Italy went to war with Turkey over Tripoli and Great Britain remained neutral and thus the Muslims in India felt aggrieved. In 1912 Russia the friend of England, perpetrated massacres in Persia. The event shocked the Muslims in India. The cry of 'Islam in danger' was raised.

Events in India also added to the dissatisfaction of the Muslims. The revocation of the partition of Bengal in November 1911 came as a rude shock to them.

It was in these circumstances that the League adopted the aim of attainment of self-government for India for the first time at its Lucknow session on 31 December, 1912. 'Without detriment to the foregoing objects, the attainment of a system of self-government suitable to India by bringing about through constitutional means a steady reform of the existing system of administration by promoting national unity and fostering public spirit among the people of India; and by co-operating with other communities for the said purposes'¹¹.

Still it was not yet quite the victory of the advanced party. A proposal, that the League should adopt the Congress goal of colonial self-government, made by a Congress Muslim, Mazhar-ul-Haq¹², found little favour. The League leaders were in no mood to accept the principle of numerical representation which parliamentary democracy of the colonial type would lead Muhammad Shafi explicitly remarked: 'The adoption of the alternative proposal put forward by some of our friends that the League should set up colonial form of self-government in India as its ultimate goal is, in my opinion, inadmissible as well as politically unsound'¹³.

It was, however, clear that the League had drawn closer to the Congress regarding the demand for self-government. The Secretary of the League, Saiyid Wazir Hasan, remarked that 'the ideal of self-government which the All-India Muslim League had placed on its programme

was an important step towards the formation of that great nationality for the building of which all Indians were aspiring'¹⁴. Nawab Syed Mahomed, the President of the annual session of the Congress held at Karachi in December 1913, hailed the resolutions of the League as 'a happy sign of the advancing times'¹⁵.

The outbreak of the First World War further radicalized Muslim opinion in India. When Turkey entered the war against England in November 1914 Indian Muslims were placed in a very awkward situation. The public assurances given by His Majesty's Government that the question of the Khilafat was one which must be decided by Muslims without interference from non-Muslim powers, served to steady Muslim opinion in India to a large extent. Only a few pan-Islamists, like the Ali brothers (Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Zafar Ali Khan, openly avowed pro-Turkish sentiments. They were interned and their newspapers were suppressed.

The Muslim uneasiness about Turkey and the impact of the new ideas generated by the war gave an opportunity to the pro-Congress elements within the League to push forward the Congress-League rapprochement initiated in 1912-13 a step further. The 1915 session of the League was held at Bombay simultaneously with that of the Congress. It was presided over by a prominent Congressite, Mazhar-ul-Haq. The League passed a resolution, moved by Jinnah to set up a committee in order to draft a scheme of post-war reforms in consultation with the Congress¹⁶. The famous Congress-League Scheme of 1916 was the result of the joint deliberations inaugurated at this session. The League had been emancipated from its old policy and began to flow with the main current of nationalist agitation in India.

Presiding over the 1916 session of the League at Lucknow Jinnah remarked about the attainment of self-government: 'It should be made clear by the Government in an authoritative manner that self-government is not a mere distant goal that may be attained at some future indefinite time, but that self-government for India is the definite aim and object of the Government to be given to the people within a reasonable time'¹⁷. The Leaders of both the League and the Congress continued to speak and act in unison during the subsequent five or six years. They presented a joint address to the Secretary of State and the Viceroy in November 1917 demanding, among other things, the fixation of a time limit for the grant of complete self-government to India. This demand was

reiterated at the annual session of the League held at Calcutta in December 1917¹⁸. Jinnah, speaking at the session, dismissed the fears of Hindu domination in a self-government India as imaginary, 'a bogey, which is put before you by your enemies, to frighten you, to scare you, away from co-operation and unity which are essential for the establishment of self-government'¹⁹. 'This country', he added, 'has not to be governed by the Mussalmans either and certainly not by the English. It is to be governed by the people and the sons of the country. I standing here, I believe I am voicing the feeling of whole India, demand the immediate transfer of a substantial power of the government of the country'²⁰.

After the publication of the Montagu-Chemsford Report early in July 1918, prominent leaders of the League voiced their dissatisfaction with its proposals on grounds exactly similar to those of their counterparts in the Congress. In resolutions echoing the language and spirit of the Congress, the League pronounced the reform proposals to be disappointing and unsatisfactory and urged substantial modifications therein at an extraordinary session of the League held at Bombay on 31 August and 1 September, 1918 to consider the Report. At its annual session in December 1918 the League, like the Congress, went further. It insisted that complete responsible government be granted to the provinces at once, and the principle of self-determination be applied to India²¹. The League, like the Congress pronounced the act of 1919 'inadequate and unsatisfactory', but decided to work for it in order to achieve self-government as early as possible²².

The Khilafat agitation gave an extremely dangerous turn to Muslim politics in India. The League changed its creed to fall in line with that of the Congress at its annual session in December 1920. The object of the League was declared et al. to be 'the attainment of Swaraj by the people of India by all peaceful and legitimate means'²³.

The leaders of the League declared themselves to be as ardent Swarajists as any other in India in the twenties of twentieth century. But the problem of Swaraj was far more complex for the Muslims than for the Hindus. Their fear of Hindu domination was deep-seated and they were determined to safeguard their individuality and interests as a community. In fact, as the prospect of Swaraj drew nearer, the Muslims began to devote their attention more anxiously to a clear definition and proper security of their position in a future self-governing India.

In their search of this security, the Muslims in India and the All-India Muslim League parted their way from the mainstream nationalist movement in 1930s and 1940s and began to demand the partition of India.

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