



A Scholar, a Nationalist, and a Nation-BUILDER: Legacy of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

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Abstract

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) was an important figure in Indian history. He is well known as an Islamic scholar, a leader in the freedom struggle, and the first Education Minister of independent India. In my understanding, Azad's life was guided by a clear philosophy called "composite nationalism" (Muttahida Qaumiyat). This idea came from his early religious thinking and his rejection of blind following of tradition (taqliq). It shaped his fight against British rule and also against the idea of dividing India on religious lines, known as the Two-Nation Theory. During the pre-independence period, he did important work through his journalism in Al-Hilal and strongly opposed the Partition. Later, in independent India, he worked to put this philosophy into practice. As Education Minister, he helped create important secular and scientific institutions like the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and the national Akademies. These institutions were meant to support education and protect the pluralist identity of India, which he had always believed in. From my understanding, his life shows a consistent vision where his political ideas and work in building institutions were connected to the same goal: a united, modern India.

Keywords: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Composite Nationalism (Muttahida Qaumiyat), Indian Independence Movement, Education Minister (India), Al-Hilal (Journalism), Partition of India, Nation-Building (or Institutional Nation-Building)

Introduction

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, whose full name was Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin Ahmed, is a very important figure in twentieth-century Indian history. As we all know, he had many roles in his life. He was a respected Islamic scholar, a leader in the Indian freedom struggle, and the first Education Minister of independent India. Because of this, people often remember him in separate ways—as a Muslim thinker, a Congress leader, or a visionary minister. From my understanding, these roles were not separate. They were all guided by one main

idea: "composite nationalism" (Muttahida Qaumiyat). This was not something he adopted later in life. It grew from his early personal and religious thinking, especially his rejection of blind following of tradition (taqliq) and his preference for rational thinking and new ideas (tajdid). This belief shaped his work before independence. It motivated his anti-British journalism and guided his political struggle against the British and against religious separatism promoted by the All-India Muslim League and the Two-Nation Theory. Later, in independent India, he tried to put this philosophy into action as Education Minister. Even after failing to

prevent Partition, he used his position to build important institutions like the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and national Akademies. These were meant to support education, culture, and a pluralist Indian identity, which he had always believed in. From my understanding, his life shows that his scholarship, politics, and ministerial work were all connected by the same vision of a united and modern India.

Literature Review

The books and studies about Maulana Abul Kalam Azad are many, showing how important and sometimes debated his life is. Most of the work about him can be divided into three kinds: biographical, political, and educational studies. All try to show his special place between religion and secular nationalism. Early biographies, like Ian Henderson Douglas's *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography*, carefully follow his journey from learning classical Islamic teachings to developing a more humanist and practical understanding of the Quran. This later thinking influenced the way he acted politically. More recent works, like S. Irfan Habib's *Maulana Azad: A Life*, focus on his role as a freethinker and a "nation-builder." Habib shows that Azad consistently fought against communal politics and worked from deep religious conviction. His own book, *India Wins Freedom*, is very important for political studies. It gives his personal view of Congress debates, political negotiations, and his disagreements with other leaders before Partition. Scholars like Rajmohan Gandhi note that while it is a key source, its version of events can be subjective. Other researchers have studied how his ideas changed over time, for example Jamal Malik shows his shift from early Salafism to secular nationalism. Many also discuss his arguments for inclusive pluralism, based on Islamic teachings. Some scholars say there are contradictions in his life, like early

pan-Islamism versus later Indian nationalism. But from my understanding, and following Habib's view, Azad's life shows a clear consistency. This paper tries to show that his political ideas and his work as Education Minister were connected. In fact, his role in building institutions after independence was a practical way to put his lifelong philosophy into action.

The Making of a Nationalist

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, born Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin Ahmed on November 11, 1888, in Mecca, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, came from a very learned family. His father, Maulana Khairuddin, was a respected Islamic scholar of Afghan origin, who had written books and taught thousands of students across India. Khairuddin had left India after the 1857 Rebellion because many scholars faced persecution from the British. Azad's mother, Sheikha Alia bint Mohammad, was also from a scholarly family in Medina. This made Azad's early life deeply connected with Islamic learning and culture. The family returned to India in 1890 and settled in Calcutta. There, his father's fame as a teacher and spiritual guide grew. Azad received a traditional Islamic education at home, first from his father and later from private tutors. He was very intelligent and learned subjects meant for much older students, including Farsi, Arabic, Shariah, fiqh, philosophy, and mathematics. As we all know, it was expected that he would follow his father's footsteps as a religious teacher.

Azad's own thinking changed this path. He took the pen name "Azad," which means "free," showing his wish to think freely and not just follow old rules blindly. He rejected Taqliq, which is blindly following the past, and instead believed in Tajdid, or innovation, meaning faith should be mixed with reasoning. His thinking was influenced by two important figures of the time: Jamaluddin al-Afghani, who supported pan-Islamism

and anti-colonial ideas, and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who encouraged modern education and rational learning. Many people of his time had to choose between these two paths, but Azad combined them in a new way. He followed Sir Syed's ideas on education, secretly learning English to read Western books, but he rejected Sir Syed's loyalty to the British. From Afghani, he took anti-British ideas, but he focused them on Indian nationalism instead of global Islam. Azad's journalism became the main way to show his ideas. In 1912, he started *Al-Hilal*, an Urdu weekly, which became very popular. In it, he explained religious teachings to encourage Muslims to join Hindus in the fight for swaraj (self-rule). He also criticized those who stayed loyal to the British. The British saw this as dangerous because he was using Islam to support independence. In 1914, they banned *Al-Hilal*, but Azad started another journal, *Al-Balagh*, to continue the same work. His activities led to his expulsion from Calcutta and imprisonment in Ranchi from 1916 to 1920.

Key Achievements in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Azad's release from internment in 1920 marked his full entry into the main Indian national movement. By then, he had already met Mahatma Gandhi, and the two immediately found common ideas. Azad joined the Indian National Congress and quickly became one of its leading figures. His first major role was as a leader of the Khilafat Movement, a post-war campaign to support the Ottoman Caliphate. In 1920, he became president of the All-India Khilafat Committee. Even though the movement was pan-Islamic, Azad and Gandhi joined it with the Non-Cooperation Movement, creating a united front against the British. This period strengthened Azad's belief in Gandhian ideas. He fully accepted satyagraha, or non-violent protest, and actively took part in all major nationalist actions for the next thirty years, including the Dandi March in 1930 and the Quit India Movement in 1942. His reputation as both a scholar and a nationalist

grew so much that in 1923, at just 35 years old, he became the youngest president in the history of the Indian National Congress.

Azad's most important role came with his second election as Congress president, from 1940 to 1946. This was a very difficult time, with World War II, the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Quit India Movement—which led to his arrest along with other Congress leaders—and the final negotiations with the British Cabinet Mission for India's independence. In March 1940, at the Congress session in Ramgarh, he gave a famous presidential speech. Here he explained “composite nationalism” (Muttahida Qaumiyat) and opposed the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution, which wanted a separate Muslim state. Azad said that though he was a Muslim, he was proud to be Indian and part of a united nation. He argued that after centuries of shared life, Indians of different religions had become one nation, and no artificial plan could divide them. His argument was not only political but also religious. While the Muslim League claimed Islam made it impossible for Muslims to live as a minority in India, Azad used Islamic history to prove the opposite. He referred to the Misaq-i-Madina, or the Covenant of Medina, where Prophet Muhammad united Muslims and non-Muslims under one political agreement for common governance and defense. This showed that a multi-religious nation was not a Western or Hindu idea, but had roots in Islamic teachings. Azad stayed strongly against partition until the end. He believed it was a serious mistake and warned that a country made only for one religion would not be stable. He predicted that Pakistan would mostly benefit the upper-class Muslims and eventually be influenced by foreign powers. As many historians note, Azad was a far-sighted leader who never gave up on a united India, even when other Congress leaders accepted Partition as unavoidable.

Post-Independence Achievements as Education Minister

After India became independent in 1947, Maulana Azad naturally became the first Minister of Education, a position he held until 1958. This was not just a job for him; it was the practical result of his whole life's work and philosophy. After failing to prevent Partition, he spent his last years trying to unite the minds of people and build a "composite culture" for India. At that time, the national literacy rate was very low, only about 12%. Azad strongly believed that education was the main way to change society and develop the nation. He also thought that a free India could not really be strong without scientific, technical, and economic independence. This meant moving away from the old colonial education system, which trained people mainly to be clerks, and focusing instead on modern research and higher education. One big step was starting the first Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Kharagpur in 1951. At its opening, he said, "I have no doubt that the establishment of this Institute will form a landmark in the progress of higher technological education and research in the country." This laid the foundation for India's later growth in science and technology. Following the Radhakrishnan Committee, Azad also set up the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1953, which became law in 1956. The UGC had the power to manage and maintain standards of universities all over India, making higher education more organized and consistent. But Azad's vision was bigger than just science or universities. He wanted to protect and promote India's arts and culture, especially after Partition, when some claimed that India's culture was divided. To show that India's culture was united and composite, he created three national Academies: the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953) for music, dance, and drama; the Sahitya Akademi (1954) for literature in all Indian languages; and the Lalit Kala Akademi (1954) for fine arts. These institutions were

designed to show that India's many artistic traditions were part of one pluralistic culture. He insisted that these bodies must stay independent from government control, saying that even the national government cannot create literature or culture by orders, making sure art stayed free from politics. Azad also had a global vision. In 1950, he founded the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and became its first President. The ICCR was meant to build cultural connections between India and other countries. Through it, Azad shared the idea that India's composite culture was not just for the country but was a strong asset to be shown to the world.

Discussion

The recognition given to Maulana Azad, both while he was alive and after his death, tells us a lot about the kind of person he was. It shows a nation slowly understanding a man whose principles were very strong and whose foresight proved right over time. The biggest award connected to him is the Bharat Ratna, which is India's highest civilian honor. Interestingly, when the award started in 1954, Azad was one of the first people offered it. But he refused firmly. His reason showed his honesty and integrity. As a serving Union Minister and member of the committee that chose awardees, he felt it was wrong for people in positions of "control and authority" to get such honors. He believed that serving the nation should itself be the reward, and public servants should not be tempted by awards. Because of this, he was not honored while alive. But later, the country corrected this. In 1992, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously, recognizing his "invaluable contribution to the nation." While the Bharat Ratna honors him as a historical figure, his most active and meaningful recognition is National Education Day, celebrated on his birthday, November 11. This was announced on September 11, 2008, by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (now the Ministry of

Education). The Ministry stated that this day would commemorate his life and his work for education in India.

This honor is very fitting. It makes sure that schools and universities all over India, including the ones he helped standardize through the UGC, remember his life and ideas every year. It shows that he was not just a politician with a minister's job, but the main thinker behind India's modern education system. By making his birthday a national day, his memory becomes more than history—it becomes a living lesson guiding India's ongoing work in education for the country's development.

Conclusion

This paper has followed the life of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, from his early days as a religious prodigy in Mecca and Calcutta to his final role as one of the key builders of modern India. In doing this, it shows that there was a strong consistency in his life that connects all his different achievements. His intellectual awakening, marked by taking the name "Azad," was a clear step away from strict traditions and towards a more rational and human understanding of faith. This thinking naturally shaped his political path. His work in the journal *Al-Hilal* was more than writing—it was using his religious knowledge to show that Hindu-Muslim unity against the British was a duty in Islam. Later, as a leader of the Indian National Congress, he spent decades trying to make this unity real. His 1940 Ramgarh speech, using the example of the Covenant of Medina, was the highest point of this idea, giving a strong answer to the Two-Nation Theory and its idea of division. Even though he could not stop the partition of India, his career became most practical and productive after independence. As the first Education Minister, he built real institutions to protect the unity and culture he believed in. The creation of the UGC, IITs, Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, and ICCR were his way

to support and nurture India's "composite culture." His recognition—like refusing the Bharat Ratna while alive and its later posthumous acceptance, along with making his birthday National Education Day—shows that his legacy is not only historical but also practical and alive in the country today. Maulana Azad's life teaches us that being a scholar, freedom fighter, and minister were not separate jobs for him—they were all part of one lifelong effort: to build a modern, plural, and self-reliant India.

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