



Exploring Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, A Pioneer Architect of Secular Education in Post-Independent India: A Critical Discussion

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Abstract: This study attempts to explore the secular thought of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, which was established by the education policy of post-independence India and is still prevalent among Indians today. Maulana Azad's educational principles and methods have been widely studied, but his secular educational philosophy has not. In this respect, we can consider it as a new work which will bring new information about his liberal secular educational philosophy. Azad was a prominent Indian scholar, journalist and politician who received harsh criticism from conservative Hindu Muslims. So, Through the present article, readers will get some new information about Azad that will help them learn more about him. It is one of the objectives of this article to create a new interest in him.

Key Words: *Philosopher, Educationist, Politician, Architect Champion, Secularism*

Introduction

Maulana Azad is prominent in history of modern India as an expert on Indian culture, poet, philosopher, writer, educationist, politician, and architect of Indian education system. Even he was also a great champion of secularism and national integration.¹ His real name is Abdul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin Ahmed Bin Khairuddin Al-Hussaini Azad, but he is better known to the most Indians as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.² Maulana' means 'educated man,' 'Azad' means 'free,' and 'Abul Kalam' means 'Lord of Dialogue',³ which he adopted as his name. As we know his birthday is celebrated as "National Education Day" across India every year to commemorate his invaluable contribution to laying the foundation of the modern education system in India. Emotionally and intellectually close to Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, he had the opportunity to be intimately associated with important decisions on freedom-oriented issues in India during the twentieth century. Having joined as Nehru's colleague during the independence movement, Azad was privileged to assume the role of advisor as Nehru's closest confidant in the post-independence cabinet. So his presence in India's first cabinet formed on 15 August 1947 was a natural occurrence. From 1947 to 1952 he served as the Minister of Education of India and from 1952 to 1958 the Department of Education, Natural and Scientific Research.⁴ It goes without saying that he had considerable influence in shaping education policy

in post-independence India. Here it must also be remembered that Azad was a thoroughly proficient scholar in traditional Arabic, Persian and Urdu and his formal education began in his father's madrasa. Some claim he could not speak or write English or any other modern language.⁵ His outstanding scholarly independence in Oriental studies was demonstrated in molding the educational system in post-independence India. Far-reaching thinking in the field of education has played an important role in improving the universal primary and higher educational status of the country in the six decades of independence. His established Sahitya Akademi, Lalit kala Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi claim much credit for raising the standard of Indian art, music and literature which can be summed up as the product of his intellectual ideas. Not only this, he helped Pandit Nehru to set up the Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and science laboratories.

Some modern researchers and historians have argued that Azad's educational philosophy is evil in many ways due to communalism. Even some say that Azad is too non-secular only in the eyes of Muslim thinkers and writers. However, here is an attempt to find the answers to the questions; [1] What is the role of Azad's educational philosophy in the post-independence Indian education system? [2] Is Azad's education plan suitable for Indian society at that time? [3] Was his educational philosophy really secular? [4] Is Azad the true pioneer architect of secular education in India? After all, is Azad really the pioneer of modern education in India? Etc.

Ancestral Identity

Maulana Azad was born on November 11, 1888 in Macca.⁶ Own Maulana Muhammad Khairuddin and mother was Sheikha Alia Bin Muhammad.⁷ The main quality of Azad's character was that he could live with limited modernity and knew how to keep an eye on the changing world. He began to come into the limelight as a national figure after his father died in 1908, because his social and religious views had already spread throughout the country. The media recognized Azad's intellectual prowess, as his articles began to appear in leading journals of the country. From an early age, he showed a keen interest in literature and edited a weekly called Al-Misbah and also started a monthly magazine called Lisan-us-Siddaq.,⁸ which gave life to his intellectual journey. It must be remembered that Azad did not receive education from any reputed educational institution in his childhood; his father's Madrasa was the basis of his formal education. Foundation of his education was in Urdu, Persian and Arabic—language and literature.⁹ But when was fifteen years old, he was given the opportunity to teach logic, mathematics and philosophy to students in this father's Madrasa. Her father was not very much interested in girls' education as well as English language learning. But Azad taught boys as well as girls in their madrasa. In 1905, Azad was sent to the world-renowned Islamic University of Al-Azhar in Cairo for two years.¹⁰ Thereafter, Azad gradually came out of Muslim conservatism and began to develop himself as a universal figure which manifested itself through his politics, open-mindedness and educational policy.

Indian education and problems

After taking charge of the Ministry of Education in India, the first thing he demanded in the interest of public education in the country was to adapt the education system naturally inherited from the British to "our national requirements".¹¹ In his first public statement at a press conference on 18 February 1947, he criticized the then-existing education system. According to him that education was "formed by non-nationals for non-national interests", and on the other hand paid his tribute to the service of the Indian common people.¹² After Indian independence, as Minister of Education, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was faced with the very challenging task of realizing and building a national system of inclusion in education as an educational strategy for India, while the government was at a loss in financial crisis. Trying to recover and revive the state from the evils of financial disparity and at the same time partition. In this scenario, a major restructuring and restructuring of the education system has become the main agenda of the government. But the Maulana tried to resolve the complexities involved in the concept of a "national" education system.¹³ As Azad's mental development was more mature than his physical growth during adolescence, he was able to understand the religious and political society not only of India but also of the world with that intelligence. In his writings, he tried to understand the complexity of the problem instead of giving simple solutions. Because he realized that the problems in Indian society are interrelated. Question is, some claim that Azad was not proficient in modern languages and literature like Bengali and English, even though he could not read and write in Bengali or English. Yet Jawaharlal Nehru entrusted his colleague Azad with the task of educating Indian society as to what chemistry worked behind it. Here, Nehru expected from him that Azad, with his sensitive mind and deep intelligence, would look at Indian education in a deeper and broader perspective and, if necessary, makes appropriate decisions about how education should be given in contemporary Indian society. It is natural to think that Azad would plan an education for illiterate Indians through which Indians would get rid of their weaknesses and build a prosperous society based on equality. Azad rightly understood the importance of communal harmony and cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims. Hence he also easily understood the prevailing rigidity built up in the name of Indian rituals and superstitions. He was strong of the opinion that if education did not develop among Muslims they would be held back mainly by ritualistic restrictions. And more even he believed that only by educating the ulama and learning in theology and law, a nucleus of the dedicated and idealistic elite would emerge which could act as a lever for the moral and intellectual regeneration of the Muslim community.¹⁴ So here it is clear that Azad was exploring Indian society with full maturity.

He believed that enlightenment would liberate people from old and superstitious beliefs. A major reason behind his firm belief in modernity was the fact that scientific knowledge and rationality are beneficial to a nation like India, which is a nation of unity in diversity. The advent of science led to the belief that all problems could be solved rationally. Azad's conception of the new aims and principles of education in post-independence India started with four important objectives in mind; (1) Democratization of education; (2) Maintenance of educational standards; (3) Broadening of educational perspectives; And (4) Promotion of mutual understanding.¹⁵ Maulana as an alternative was a system of 'liberal, democratic, humanitarian and inclusion of educational approach' which would generate and transform the outlook of

the people and set the nation on the path of progress and opulence.¹⁶ Evidence of his mental ambivalence about the conservatism and orthodoxy of Muslim society can be found in his autobiography where he describes himself: "It was a time of great mental crisis for him. He was born in a family that was deeply rooted in religious traditions. All the customs of traditional life were accepted without question and the family did not like the slightest deviation from the orthodox ways. He could not reconcile himself with the prevailing customs and beliefs and my heart was full of a new sense of revolt. The idea he had acquired from my family and early training could no longer satisfy him. He felt he must find the truth for himself. Almost instinctively he began to move out of my family orbit and seek his own path."¹⁷ It can be argued here that his understanding on the one hand condemns the conservative mentality of Islam and on the other hand, reveals his universal modern attitude.

Pluralist Spirit

In 1923, his address to the Delhi session of the Indian National Congress, is a vivid example of his pluralistic thinking. He addressed on the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity in his presidential address: "Eleven hundred years of common history has enriched India with our common achievements. Our language, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners, our daily life are innumerable. In fact, everything bears the stamp of our joint effort."¹⁸ Azad's thoughts on the need for interfaith harmony and Indian religious harmony are very clear. According to him, in a subcontinent like India, which has a unique cultural tradition of unity in diversity, believers of different religions should move together and this he coordinated by 'My Feeling' to maintain communal harmony in India.¹⁹ He castigated any kind of narrow outlook, expressed as cultural tradition, as national chauvinism or religious orthodoxy.²⁰ Hindu-Muslim unity and nationalist thought were the most important aspects of his profound thought. He also believed that the country's problems would not be solved without unity.²¹ Here as an example, I can cite his speech at a conference of Majlis-e-Khilafat, where he said "For India, for India's freedom, and? Truth and duty, Hindu-Muslim unity and harmony are absolutely essential."²² So it can be said here very naturally that whoever cherishes the great ideal of 'Pluralism' in the heart of his thoughts, whatever else he does, it is natural that he will not give priority to any particular religion in the reconstruction, creation and propagation of Indian educational policy.

However, the events that profoundly influenced Azad's life and helped him rise above fanaticism to develop progressive thinking were respectively

[1] After his father's death in 1908, when he visited France and some Islamic countries such as Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Turkey. , there he met prominent leaders of various groups, Young Turks, Arab nationalists, and pan-Islamic movements that had a profound and decisive influence on Azad's political thought.²³

[2] The partition of Bengal was one of the turning points in his life, where he rejected the mainstream of the Muslim middle class, who wanted partition and considered the colonial government as his benefactor. He then associated himself with the anti-British movement and even joined some underground radical groups, which arose after partition. After that he came to contact

with Sufi Ambarprasad and Ajit Singh in Punjab and Arabindo Ghosh, Shyam Sundar Chakravorty and Lala Hara Dayal, all leaders of militant anti-colonial movement in the country²⁴

[3] And he was influenced by some writings and events such as; Jamal-al-Din Afghani who was influenced by a pan-Islamic modernist reformer who identified European countries as enemies of Islam. He also met Iranian revolutionaries fighting Qajar tyranny, followers of Afghan Shaykhs Muhammad Abduh and Said Pasha, and supporters of Kamal Pasha. He was informed about the Young Turks program.²⁵

[4] He was attracted by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's writing which was influence by Greek thought²⁶ and he was influenced by the British' scientific inventions like railways, telegram service concept of modern science.²⁷

[5] He was inspired by Rousseau's ideas about the universal well-being of man. As Education Minister, he laid utmost emphasis on the importance of secular education and the importance of education in shaping the character of our young citizens.²⁸ It is true that Azad was Staunch Muslim, but he stood for national unity and communal harmony as inevitable ingredients for newly born India as a nation. He made no difference between Hindu and Muslim and looked all kith and kin.²⁹ Many have claimed that these influences shaped Azad's mind in a way that helped him become a culturalist, a man who believed in composite culture.

Founder of secular education in India

Azad's Ministry of Education stated in the context of what decisions should be necessary to promote education in post-independence India namely; [i] the provision of basic education on a universal, free and compulsory basis for all our school-going children; [ii] the provision of adult education in order to wipe out the colossal illiteracy of our masses; [iii] the improvement and expansion of technical education in order to solve the problem of manpower for industrial and technical development; and [iv] the reorganization and improvement of university education from a national point of view.³⁰ Besides, Azad emphasized seven values in formulating and promoting Indian education policy which contributes to shaping man and his society in the pursuit of excellence. Which were [i] the quest of truth, is the principal aim of education, but one should not impose one's truth upon others through violence and dogmatism. It comes from openness to different points of view and through tolerance of belief other than one's own, [ii] The concept of justice is another aim of education which is related to appreciation of rights and performance of duties as necessary conditions to the discipline of the individual and the good of society, [iii] Spread of enlightenment through right type of education, for true civilization and equality of life. [iv] Cooperation and unity must be learnt through togetherness and friendship thus laying the foundation for peace and harmony, [v] The practice of courtesy and chivalry is a grace of life and enriches its quality, [vi] The spirit of daring is the most valued asset of youth–society and school should give scope and encouragement to the flowering of the spirit of pioneering and creativity and [vii] Quality of humility which chastens and sustains the spirit of man and strivings of his mind.³¹ His mission spirit of education was 'Education for all, which unquestionably proves his composite cultural development mentality.

Question of Madrasa Education and Azad

For more than a decade in tandem with Azad's skilled leadership as education ministry stewardship from 1947 to 1958, he availed himself of the unique opportunity to formulate the educational plan in the new India, implement it and set new national goals for education. Azad *Ghubar-i-Khatir*, in a letter, where he wrote about education in Indian Madrasa, especially Islamic madras's, commented on the educational system and curriculum in the context of education; "It was an antiquated educational system that was barren in every respect—the teaching method was defective, the subjects of study worthless, the selection of books, errors in text and calligraphy."³² He also wrote, "Just think what knowledge would have become of me if I had stopped there and not gone in search of new curiosity! Obviously, my early education could have given me nothing but a stagnant mind, completely alien to reality".³³ His educational spirit was scientific and modern, nourished in Western thought, which undoubtedly proved his mixed cultural development mindset, while questioning the conservative mentality, helped to expand modern open-mindedness. He seems to have been criticized in many ways by the Muslim community as there were few people who could understand his scientific and modern educational spirit.

Primary Education and Azad

He said that the first and foremost task of the national government should be to provide free and compulsory basic education for all. He strongly believed that a good school is a national asset of the highest value anywhere or at any time. Schools are the laboratories that create the future citizens of a nation. In his view, it is important to remember that the primary social agenda of education is to develop our human resources in the right direction.³⁴ Azad wanted to create a nationwide system of basic education for all children of school-going age and in his opinion, the medium of instruction in school education should be in the mother tongue, even the provision of basic education will be a universal free and compulsory basis for all the school going children.³⁵ Azad was deeply impressed by the progress children had made in the West in primary education. He was strongly committed to the scientific aspects of the Western education system and the two things that inspired him the most were the concept of independence as a teaching strategy and the all-embracing importance of primary education.³⁶ After that, for the overall improvement of post-independence education in India, he wanted that the scope of adult education should include in the social education system. To eradicate the illiteracy of the large masses of the country, the provision of adult education is urgently needed.³⁷ Throughout his life, Azad was deeply influenced by the French philosopher Rousseau. The innate goodness of man was something he agreed with Rousseau. Even in his 'Al-Hilal'-Journal discussion 'On the Innate Goodness of Man,' he constructs Rousseau as a man who revolutionized the intellectual and social life of the age of freedom. In addition, he agreed with Rousseau that children need and can perceive truth independently.

Higher Education and Azad

Azad was the first person to seriously raise the issue of Indian National Education System and Policy which served as a milestone in the formulation of India's education policy. The new version of the National Education Policy formulated in 1992 was based on the Education Policy of 1986 which was conceptualized by Azad.³⁸ Today's philosophy of education is much more modern than that of modern thinkers. Because education is, in his philosophy, a tool for social change. Azad was successful as education minister because he knew the needs of the Indian society, and how quickly to build the country's education edifice, which should be given the highest priority. He saw education not as a destination but as a tool for social reform. One of the keys to his success as education minister was his far-reaching vision of education. He saw education not as a destination but as a tool for social reform. After the departure of the British, Maulana Azad's major challenge as the Education Minister was to ensure an increase in the number of students in the universities and at the same time ensure that there is no deterioration in the quality of education. He opined that Indians should learn the Devanagari Urdu script and besides, he pointed out some major ways by which Indian education can be taken to another level in the future.³⁹ As a minister of education in post-independence India, the proposal he gave in a speech regarding the construction of Indian education infrastructure is groundbreaking in one word, such as;

- (1) The time has come to setting up a national museum, where the finest representation of Indian philosophy, literature and art may be preserved.
- (2) There should be provision for fundamental research work in higher education and specific funds should be allocated for it every year.
- (3) He proposed to appoint a committee to prepare a guideline for teachers in the interest of the new scheme of education. He was against the tendency to focus too much on curriculum formulation and question consideration and general education curriculum construction and to impose rigid curricular uniformity.
- (4) He also said what the government should do to promote education is to come to the aid of the institution at the initial stage so that lack of funds does not stop the institutions from experimenting. Basically, two educational institutions namely Jamia Millia University, Delhi and Santiniketan West Bengal received that financial assistance.
- (5) He urgently asked for an immediate attention on the educational development of Archaeological Studies in India.
- (6) Referring to Disraeli's ideas where he rightly admits that democracy has no future unless it educates its people; he says we must depend on broadcasts and films for the necessary equipment of modern science until it comes into our hands.⁴⁰

Architects of Educational Institutions in India

He was a true proponent of a liberal modern Indian education system in India, as evidenced by his brainchild of establishing several educational regulatory bodies and councils. Such as; in 1948, University Grant

Commission, All India Council for Secondary Education, Secondary Education Commission, All India Council for Technical Education, Adult Education Board, Rural Higher Education Board, Central Social Development Board, Central Education Board, Education and Vocational Guidance Bureau, National Organization for Basic Education, Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Sahitya Academy, Sangeet Natak Academy and Lalit Kala Academy etc.,⁴¹ He was also a founder of Kharagpur IIT, nowadays, which is a pioneer technical engineering educational institution in India, even financial support was given to Santiniketan by him.⁴² It proved that Azad was a pioneer architect of Institutional secular education.

Criticism

In his last address as president of Congress at Ramgarh session, he said: "I am a Muslim. I feel proud to be a Muslim. I have inherited the glorious tradition of Islam spread over thirteen centuries. I will not lose it. Islamic teachings, Islamic history, Islamic science, art and Islamic Culture are the wealth of my heritage. It is my duty to preserve them. In my capacity as a Muslim, I have a position in religious and cultural circles. I cannot tolerate anyone interfering therein. Despite all these sentiments, I have yet another concept which is generated by the realities of my life. The spirit of Islam does not forbid me from it; rather it guides me in this direction. I do proudly believe that I am an Indian. I am a component of a united and undividable India. I am such a significant component of this united nation, without which the edifice of its greatness remains incomplete. I am an inevitable factor of its composition and structure. I can never resign from this claim."⁴³ After searching the core philosophy of Azad, was his deep religious temperament. Even though was a spiritualist and a scholar of Islamic religion and philosophy but free from communal feelings and prejudices. Even praised the Islamic religion but he did not criticise any other religion.⁴⁴ According to Azad, 'If a country is to be free from corruption and become a nation of good minds, I strongly feel there are three main social members who can make a difference. They are fathers, mothers and teachers'.⁴⁵ As he was well aware of the responsibility of the state in the education of the nation, he said, 'Every person has the right to an education that will enable him to develop his faculties and lead a fully human life. Such education is the birthright of every citizen. A state cannot claim to fulfill its responsibilities unless it provides for every individual means of acquiring knowledge and self-improvement.'⁴⁶

But Azad was a strong believer in the co-existence of all religious communities. His visits to countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Turkey shaped his worldview and his approach towards secular politics. He was deeply affected by the violence witnessed during India's Partition. Azad travelled through the violence-affected regions of Bengal, Assam and Punjab and contributed to establishing the refugee camps and ensuring the supply of food and other basic resources.⁴⁷ The underlying objectives of Azad's life were to spread communal unity and to provide proper education and training of India's welfare. He set about promoting a balanced outlook among the Indians and to fill their hearts with love and tolerance for each other.⁴⁸ Maulana Azad tried desperately to convince Patel and Nehru not to take a final decision on the partition of India. Patel was so adamant about the partition of India that he was not at all willing to accept anyone else's opinion.⁴⁹ Even Maulana warned Jawaharlal Nehru, "If we agree to divide India, then history will never forgive us."⁵⁰ In his capacity as a minister and as a politician, he supported the promotion

of national unity based on a rich diversity of cultures and beliefs. Those textbooks and reading materials that promote nationalism and unity were especially important to him.⁵¹ Azad has always considered Hindu-Muslim unity and brotherhood as a primary source of contribution to Indian culture and heritage. He is known as a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity. During the freedom struggle to liberate India from British rule, his contribution to Hindu-Muslim unity was crucial.⁵²

Conclusion

After a long critical discussion, it should be concluded that Maulana Azad is a true visionary rising sun in the original architecture of secular education in India post-independent India. Because (1) He was not a blind supporter of Madrasa education while his foundation was laid into the Muslim Madrasa education. He is a philosopher who brought out the best of both Eastern and Western philosophy through experiments in laying the foundations of post-independence Indian education. He was criticized not only by some Hindu thinkers but equally by the Muslim community of the time because his call for a far-reaching Hindu-Muslim rapprochement through education was not understood by them. Maulana Azad envisioned nation-building as possible only through the totality. It is possible only through secular education and communal harmony. He continued to promote and protect the secular character of the nation despite adverse conditions and resistance from within and outside India. His educational policy is imbued with ideals of secular, liberal, modern and universal education that are relevant even today. His vision paved the way for education for all.

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