

Maulana Azad as the Minister of Education: A Gandhian Choice for Independent India

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ABSTRACT

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, along with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, is counted among the makers of modern India. After India gained Independence in 1947, Azad, on Mahatma Gandhi's persuasion, joined the government of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and served as minister of education from 1947 until his death in 1958. During his tenure, Azad made women's and rural education a priority and was instrumental in establishing many of India's top institutions of higher learning, such as the Jamia Millia Islamia university in Aligarh, and the first Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur and the University Grants Commission. Similarly, he set up a number of cultural organisations such as Sangeet Natak Akadami, Sahitva Akadami and Lalit Kala Akadami etc. He also founded the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, a government organization fostering cultural exchange between India and other international communities. He is also credited for universalization of basic education and integration of arts and the traditional crafts in the formal education.

INTRODUCTION

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad is a key figure in the pantheon of great leaders and makers of modern India. His choice as the minister of education in independent India, was remarkable in itself given the fact that, among the founding figures of independent India, that included Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, he was unique as someone who had not been through the mill of colonial education, had not gone to one of those schools or colleges established by the British in colonial India, had not travelled to the temples of enlightenment and modern learning in Europe. What English he had knowledge of was self-taught as an adult, in a British prison.¹ Not only that, he even did not attend any madrasa too (he was tutored as a child at home only), and Jawaharlal Nehru had to issue a clarification to correct a Government Resolution carried in the newspapers in the morning after his death that said that Azad had studied at the Al-Azhar University of Cairo, Egypt.² Yet by all accounts, he was a profoundly erudite man. His "keen and well-trained mind" with knowledge of the past and of the present and "ripe wisdom" which, according to Jawaharlal Nehru "is given to few" put him on a high pedestal even among his towering contemporaries. On his death, Nehru called him a man of luminous intelligence and compared him with "the great men of the Renaissance in European history, or in a later period, of the Encyclopaedists who preceded the French Revolution, men of intellect, men of action".³

The most important part of the story is that he was actually Mahatma Gandhi's choice for the ministry of education, supported of course by Nehru and Patel, his comrades of over thirty years.⁴ Mahatma Gandhi, after Azad's initial reluctance and refusal, persuaded him to be the (first) minister of education in independent India.⁵ Gandhi considered Maulana Abul Kalam Azad an emperor of learning and erudition. As A. B. Rajput noted (in 1946), Azad combined in him the qualities of both Caesar and Paul, for his actions and achievements, though symbolical of the present age, require yet another age to be fully understood and recognized.⁶ Nehru remembered him as a man who truly represented the culture of India which was affected by the culture of the nations of West Asia (the Iranian culture, the Persian culture, the Arabic culture) which affected India for thousands of years — a man who cannot be replaced as the age which produced such a man had already passed.⁷

As an erudite scholar well-versed in both Oriental and Western learning and a towering intellectual with a global perspective of knowledge and a sense of belonging to the Indian cultural traditions, Maulana Azad was eminently suitable to lead the country in the field of education, learning and culture. Azad earnestly worked to ensure India occupy a place of intellectual pre-eminence in the comity of nations. In eleven years of his career (1947-58) as the minister of education, he

struggled relentlessly to reconstruct the educational system of independent India, ensuring a bright future for the youth of the nation and for generations to come.

Gokhale's Elementary Education Bill (1912)

As the minister of education, he focused on scientific and technical education, which he felt was indispensable for the development of a country colonized and exploited for over 150 years. Even in the early phase of his career as a revolutionary journalist during the freedom struggle, education was one of the issues which Azad held dear. Education, as a basic commitment from the very beginning of his involvement in the freedom struggle, can be amply seen in the pages of *Al-Hilal*, a chronicle of the freedom struggle launched as early as in July 1912. Even before that, his involvement with the *Nadwat ul-Ulama* of Lucknow and a critical engagement with the Aligarh Muslim University gave him opportunity to articulate his views on matters concerning education. It is interesting to note here that today's Jamia Millia Islamia University as a sapling was planted at the campus of the Aligarh Muslim University in October 1920 (in September that year the MAO College became a university) by Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Azad, among several other Muslim leaders, as part of the Non-Cooperation Movement.⁸

In March 1912, at the fifth session of the Muslim League held at Calcutta, some members voiced their opposition to Mr. Gopal Krishn Gokhale's Elementary Education Bill on the grounds that if it was passed, Hindi would become powerful at the expense of Urdu. Maulana Azad fully supported the bill and called this criticism as politically motivated to favour the British colonial regime.⁹

Religious Education in the Secular State

As the first minister of education in independent India, he firmly believed that India cannot do without some sort of religious education. He had a rare insight into the Indian ethos that led him to believe that, unlike in the West, India cannot have an intellectual mould without religion. "We cannot have an intellectual mould without religion", he said in the meeting of the newly instituted Central Advisory Board of Education held on January 13, 1948. The responsibility of providing religious education should be undertaken by the government, it could not be entrusted to private teachers who, though literate, were not educated in the proper sense and to whom religion meant nothing but bigotry.¹⁰

A Global Perspective

Maulana Azad, as a minister of education, had a cosmopolitan outlook and global perspective.

He noted with regret that the terrestrial globe which nature has created as one has been divided by man into different compartments. Presiding over the UNESCO General Conference held in Delhi in 1956, he said: "Like mistaught geography, mistaught history has also become an instrument for the division of mankind. In our current history books, we are told that men belong to different races and nations. The story of these nations emphasises their internecine conflicts so that the relation between men from different groups is represented as one of hatred and discord".¹¹ Not content with this, we men have painted the common world in different colours and demarcated them as Asia and Europe, America and Africa in order to ensure that these divisions are maintained. He hoped that UNESCO will help in devising new maps for children in the elementary stages in which the world will be painted in one colour; and we can be able to teach the child that he is a denizen of the world first and foremost, and we can then go on to tell him that just as a town is divided into different wards for purposes of convenience, but nevertheless the town remains one, so the world is divided into segments like Asia and America, Africa and Europe, but such divisions do not disrupt the unity of the world.

He believed that India shall find a secure place in the comity of nations only if we are international minded and tolerant." Nevertheless, he was fully aware of and appreciated the intellectual achievements of the Indian peoples in the past especially in philosophy, mathematics and music. He believed that the Indian mind advanced beyond the stage reached by Pythagoras; it was superior in every respect to the achievements of the Greeks except in Astronomy and Logic. The Upanishads, in his view, contained the earliest exposition of the pantheistic thought on which the edifice of the Neo-Platonic thought, and later *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* of Ibn Arabi, was built. He, as a minister, initiated a programme of translation of Indian classics into foreign languages, including Arabic and Persian. In this regard, he made special mention of the work of Wadi al-Bustani, an Arab poet who has translated Ramayana and Mahabharata into Arabic.¹²

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)

Maulana Azad believed that in olden times India was not only a fountain of learning but also a meeting place of different literary and cultural trends. He complained that the services of ongoing researches in the field of Egyptology and Syriology have not been fully utilized in explaining our ancient past and suggested that Mohenjo-Daro civilization should be studied in the light of recent excavations in Kuwait and Bahrain. Keeping in view this position of India, he established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) which was expected to encourage the study of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Chinese and other oriental languages that have contributed to the development of human civilization. It was he who suggested that the

Indian government should now extend the activities of cultural association to foreign countries and that it would be good to have cultural centres opened for the understanding of Indian civilization and philosophy and their value to the wide world.¹³ The council started an Arabic quarterly *Thaqafat ul-Hind* establishing free India's intellectual contact with the Arab world. Expanding the cultural activities of the Council, Maulana Azad sent three professors of Sanskrit and Indology to Iran, Turkey and Cambodia. His interest in programmes of cultural exchange enhanced intellectual status of India in the contemporary world.¹⁴

IIT, Kharagpur

As the first Minister of Education in independent India, his career was characterised by three broad visions: universalization of basic education, emphasis on social education aimed at promoting social solidarity, and providing facilities for building self-reliance in higher technology. One of the early decisions that he took as Minister of Education was that the Government must improve the facilities for higher technical education in the country, so that we could ourselves meet most of our needs. He gave urgent importance to the establishment of four institutions of the standard of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Inaugurating the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur in 1951, he said: "I can clearly visualize the day when the great potentialities of this Institute will be fully realized".¹⁵

From UGC and IITs to Lalit Kala Akademi

From establishing the UGC, IITs, Scientific Research Laboratories and educational boards and commissions to Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, National Museum in Rashtrapati Bhavan and National Gallery of Modern Art, Maulana Azad gave a robust and most capable leadership to the nascent educational set up in India left in lurch by the British colonialism.

Addressing the first meeting of the Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi on August 5, 1954, he said: "I have always been of the view that apart from the intrinsic value of arts for its own sake, it is an essential element in education as it develops the aesthetic sensibilities of man." He regarded education as incomplete, whether at the secondary or university level, if it does not train our faculties to the perception of beauty. Inaugurating the Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi, he further said: "I may remind you of what I said at the conference in Calcutta in defence of art in education and life. It is today realised that no education can be complete which does not pay proper attention to the development and refinement of the emotions. This can be done best through the provision of facilities for training the sensibilities by the practice of one of the fine arts".¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Maulana Azad was very much ahead of his times. Many of the causes which have come into prominence recently and are hotly debated today, for example reform of Madrasa curriculum and its modernization in keeping with the university education system, the Right to Education (RTE) for students under 14 years, universalization of basic education beyond caste and gender considerations, integration of arts with the traditional crafts and in education etc, were already espoused by him when he was at the helm of affairs in the ministry of education, albeit without much success in certain areas.¹⁷

What is even more interesting in our context is that he invariably quoted the scripture as a proof of Islamic justification even for music and fine arts and based his arguments entirely on "the explicit text of Quran". The Quran was for Maulana Azad what the Gita was for Mahatma Gandhi. There can be no doubt about the fact that Maulana Azad's educational outlook was fundamentally Quranic in inspiration, yet he synthesized readily anything of value anywhere. He expanded Islamic values on a national scale, going beyond the religious boundaries especially in restructuring the inherited British system of education in keeping with cultural traditions and aspirations of the people of India.¹⁸

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