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Azad, Jinnah and the Partition

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Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography by Ian Henderson Douglas; edited by Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll; Oxford University Press, Bombay 1988; pp.359, Rs.190.

India Wins Freedom by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (the complete version); Orient Longman, Madras, 1988, pp.283, price no mentioned.

The historiography of Indian Muslim politics in the pre-independence decades of the twentieth century abounds in controversies. One of the more engaging ones centres on the role of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, two men with world views so different as to make comparison seem almost hazardous. Sherwani-clad Azad is a study in contrast to Jinnah in his double-breasted Savile Row suits. Appearances, however, can be deceptive. Yet the Maulana's deep religious convictions and advocacy of a composite Indian nationalism, and the Quaid-i-Azam's secular leanings and espousal of a specifically Muslim demand for a Pakistan hint at rich complexities defying austere explanations. This may be one reason why there is no definitive work comparing Azad and Jinnah's clashing political styles and ideological orientations. Analyses of Azad and Jinnah, severally rather than jointly, may well have obfuscated the many elements of counterpoint in their political posturing which, although stubbornly unacknowledged by both, did much to shape the destiny of Muslims in the final few decades of the British rule in India. With the appearance of Douglas' biography and the complete version of Azad's memoirs, in both of which Jinnah is conspicuous more by his absence than his presence, a comparative study of these two grandees of Muslim politics in the subcontinent awaits its scholar more urgently than ever.

And it will be a fortunate scholar. Many of the cob-webs covering Muslim politics in undivided India have been cleared away by recent scholarship, allowing for more dispassionate analysis than was possible in the initial decades after partition. The availability of the Quaid-i-Azam and Muslim League papers in Pakistan, official records in Britain and the Indian National Congress and private papers in India - which will hopefully soon include the famous but as yet out of sight 'Azad papers' - should make the study entirely feasible. Douglas' biography of Azad and the unsanitized version of *India Wins Freedom*, will necessarily be part of the secondary sources for any such project. The meticulous efforts of Douglas' editors, Minault and Troll, to incorporate some of the new studies into his dissertation - written in the sixties and published posthumously some twenty year later - will be especially useful in this respect. By contrast, the editorial hand which glued the much vaunted 'thirty pages' onto the old edition of Azad's autobiography is visible only in the form of asterisks; the reader is at a loss as to which asterik begins or ends

a new revelation. Yet the uneven editorial quality of the two books should not deter the reader, much less the researcher, from culling information and insights from Douglas' finely tuned intellectual and religious biography and Azad's self-consciously pruned political autobiography.

Advancing the thesis that Azad's thinking in response to different experiences was marked more by consistency than contradiction, Douglas embarks upon a chronological analysis of his intellectual and religious development. The choice of method is something of a mixed treat. It allows Douglas to present a most fascinating account of Azad's psychological and intellectual development - his revulsion at his father's religious prejudices, authoritarianism and practice of *piri*; his 'consuming passion' and subsequent doubts about Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writing; his loss and recovery of faith; his peripatetic and precocious career as a journalist; his remarkable erudition in Arabic sources and familiarity with the ideas of key thinkers in the Muslim world such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida and Jamaluddin Afghani; his disdain for the conservative ulema as well as westernised Muslims; his dreams of becoming the imam of Indian Muslims and, finally, his career in the secular embrace of the Indian National Congress. But in finessing the details, Douglas often blunts the sharpness of his central argument. The reader is left with a sense of unease about the consistency in the Maulana's theory and praxis. A thematic approach might have enabled Douglas to argue the thesis more concisely and clearly without losing very much of the texture and flavour. As it stands, Douglas' thesis is at risk of failing to convince those sympathetic to the notion of consistency in Azad's thinking without managing to sway the unsympathetic.

Notable among the latter are some Pakistani scholars who have long asserted that Azad's earlier commitment to a Muslim revivalism and the inseparability of religion and politics was in stark contradiction to his later emphasis on the imperative of Hindu-Muslim unity and a composite nationalism. The same quarters have also tried explaining away the apparently similar contradiction in Jinnah, the erstwhile ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, by conjuring up the vision of his metamorphosis as a sexagenarian into an intransigent communalist. This is precisely the kind of metahistory which Douglas purportedly sets out to bury. But where a few political studies have driven long nails in the coffin of the metahistory surrounding Jinnah, Douglas' intellectual and religious odyssey leaves him mired in Azad's complex mental world. He accepts Aziz Ahmad's contention that Azad was never able to evolve from within Islam a coherent political doctrine to justify his theory of composite nationalism. While correctly refusing to see this as evidence of a contradiction, Douglas attributes the 'fervent Muslim revivalism' of Azad's *al-Hilal* and Khilafat days and the post-1920's emphasis on Hindu-Muslim unity to his 'compartmentalized thinking'. Resorting to the notion of mental dualism in order to displace that of contradiction is not very tidy logic. Pragmatism and idealism co-exist in an individual, not as compartmentalised ways of thinking but as tactical responses which are a product of a single, albeit multifaceted mental process. Azad's inability to see any contradiction between his predicament as a Muslim and an Indian or, for that matter, between his sense of mission about mobilising Muslims against imperialism and in favour of a composite nationalism could just as well be explained as the pragmatic response of an idealistic mind operating in a complex socio-political milieu.

Tying up the multifarious threads in Azad's thinking with one hand and his politics with the other is admittedly not a simple exercise. Douglas certainly succeeds in making Azad's innermost recesses and impressive intellectual achievements more intelligible to the English-speaking readership. The sections on Azad's place in the wider world of Muslim discourse on nationalism, religion and politics will be relished by those interested in the historical cross-exchange of ideological currents between South and West Asia. But there are disappointments for those with a more squarely South Asian focus. As Troll realizes, Douglas underplays the extent to which Azad's revivalistic and Pan-Islamic thinking influenced 'Muslim separatism' and, indeed, continues to influence the protagonists of the 'Islamic state' in Pakistan. This is an omission which takes much away from Douglas' laudable attempt to resolve the paradoxes of Azad, the Muslim prodigy and sage turned Congress spokesman of Indian Muslims. His assessment of Azad as 'a sadly misunderstood man, but one who, even with the best will, is hard to understand' (p.252) almost reads like the testimony of a scholar who tried, and tried well, but fell short of unravelling all of the knots.

One looks in vain to Azad's revelations, old and new. Contrary to expectations, the additions to the earlier edition fail to infuse vitality to what was to begin with a disappointing political autobiography. None of the additions is particularly shocking and, in any case, were foreshadowed in some recent studies including that of the reviewer (See A.Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, 1985). The criticisms of Jawaharlal Nehru, coinciding as they did with his centenary celebrations, no doubt stirred controversy. But even with the addition of some telling asides *India Wins Freedom* (the complete version) does not recount the whole story. Politics clearly triumphed over Azad's sense of history. Where he lifts the curtain in one place he drops it on three others. A fuller and, regrettably, never to be written version of the memoirs alone can fill the lacunae in historical knowledge of what exactly transpired in the Congress anterooms between Azad and his colleagues as they debated and charted the political fate of Indian Muslims once the British quit India.

Nowhere is Azad's self-censorship more in evidence than in his account of the critical period between the failure of the Simla conference in July 1945 and the Muslim League's withdrawal in July 1946 of its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission's plan. Scrutinizing the British documents published in Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon (ed.), *The Transfer of Power, 1942-7*, series one is struck by the convergence, if not congruence, of Azad's proposal before the general elections of 1945-46 for a weak federal structure and Hindu-Muslim parity at the centre with Jinnah's demand for a Pakistan based on the principle of Muslim self-determination. Azad first mentions his proposal for a solution of the communal problem in the context of the Cabinet Mission plan, that is after the election campaigns had further embittered communal relations and considerably hardened Jinnah's and the Muslim League's position. As *The Transfer of Power*, Volume VI, documents sixty-eight and seventy-six indicate, Azad's proposal sent to Gandhi on August 2, 1945 received a most lukewarm response from the Mahatma. Urging him to keep mum and consult and coordinate with the inner voices of the Congress Working Committee, Gandhi in particular expressed disquiet about Azad's suggestion of a convention whereby a Hindu and a Muslim would alternate as head of the Indian federation. Minault in her concluding editorial

comments to Douglas' biography mentions Azad's proposal and his exchange with Gandhi. But apart from noting that Gandhi and the Congress's reluctance to support Azad before the general election made compromises with the Muslim League more difficult after them, she misses just how close the Maulana's proposals in fact came to hijacking Jinnah and the Muslim League's demands. Minault blandly endorses the conventional wisdom that the 'partition of India was a victory for Jinnah and the Muslim League and a defeat for Azad and those who felt that the Muslims of the subcontinent would be hurt the most by a political arrangement that would, inevitably, divide them' (Douglas, p.293). This confusion between victory and defeat as well as political aims and the end-result prevents her from raising some rather obvious questions about the timing, substance and fate of the Maulana's proposed solution of the communal problem.

What was most significant about the proposal was Azad's willingness to drop Congress's insistence on a strong center. In this way Azad aimed at placating the leaders of the Muslim-majority provinces whose support for the Pakistan demand, as he shrewdly realized, was intended as an insurance against possible encroachments on their provincial autonomy by a Congress dominated centre. Azad was looking for a way to dilute Jinnah and the Muslim League's appeal in the very provinces that posed the biggest threat to the unity of India. Proof that after the collapse of the Simla conference Azad at least had detected the dangers in Muslim sentiment drifting towards Jinnah and the Muslim League was a plea to his Hindu colleagues to leave it to the Muslims to determine their rightful place in India's future political arrangements. Azad could feel the collective pulse of his co-religionists. He knew only too well that the main attraction of the League's demand was a deep-seated psychological fear of Hindu domination rather than a careful cost-benefit analysis by Muslims, both high and lowly, of a Pakistan entailing the physical amputation of India.

And yet Azad does not explain why his proposal remained in cold storage until after the arrival of the Cabinet Mission. Nor does he care to comment on the implications of Congress's failure to seize the initiative before the general elections and alleviate Muslim suspicions by devising a definite policy on the Muslim question. There is a hint, and a very fleeting one at that, of Azad's diminishing stature after the Simla conference of 1945. In one of the originally expurgated passages Azad mentions Nehru's attempt to sideline him by insisting that a subcommittee of the Congress Working Committee rather than the party president should hold discussions with the Cabinet Mission (Azad, p.139). This can be attributed to strong opposition to Azad's proposal for a weak federation and Hindu-Muslim parity at the centre within the Congress High Command. But as is typical of the personalised style of the entire autobiography, Azad sees individual rather than policy motives in the actions of his Congress colleagues. In this instance Nehru's 'vanity' and impatience with 'anybody...receiv[ing] greater support or admiration' than himself (Azad, pp.137-138) was presumably forcing the Pandit to 'oppose' the Maulana's 'line of action on almost every item' (Azad, p.138). Whether Azad is misleading or being naive is anyone's surmise.

Yet what is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt is that Nehru was not the lone Congressman harbouring misgivings about the Cabinet Mission's proposal for a three-way grouping of the

British Indian provinces and a union centre restricted to three subjects. The Mission's plan had come within striking distance of the substance of what Jinnah really wanted and almost matched Azad's blueprint for a settlement of the communal problem. Azad is right about the dire effects of Nehru's July 10, 1946 press conference on uninformed Muslim opinion already startled by Jinnah's readiness to accept less than a sovereign Pakistan. But in conveying the impression that if Nehru had not made his 'astonishing statement' (Azad, p.164) on grouping the League and the Congress would have had no other reasons to bicker and fall out, Azad once again is the politician upholding the party line rather than the chronicler revealing wholesome as well as unwholesome truths about dominant trends within the party. It may be that Azad deemed it politic not to disclose the extent to which the Congress High Command as a whole, and not just Nehru, was in the grips of the communal virus for which he so unreservedly accuses Jinnah and the Muslim League. How else could he have remained with a party which, even according to his own story, played a decisive role in destroying his hopes of reconciling Muslim revivalism with a composite Indian nationalism? For a man who withheld information as he strained to justify his political choices to posterity, Azad must secretly have known the answer to the question he rhetorically posed for his arch rival: '...if the League was willing to accept the Cabinet Mission Plan - which denied the right of Muslims to form a separate state - why had Mr Jinnah made so much fuss about an independent Islamic State?'. After all, partition as decreed by Mountbatten at the insistence of the Congress High Command was a defeat which the Congress's Maulana and the Muslim League's Quaid-i-Azam shared in common.