

Comment

Maulana Muhammad Ali - A Strategic Point in Indo-Muslim Politics

*Sharif al Mujahid**

‘A great man’, says Justice Oliver Wendell, Jr., ‘represents a great ganglion in the nerves of society, or to vary the figure, a strategic point in the campaign of history, and part of his greatness consists in being *there*’. (*italic ours*).

And Maulana Muhammad Ali was one such nerve-centre in Indo-Muslim society during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, he was one such strategic point in the onward march of Indo-Muslim politics that eventually found culmination and crystallization in the emergence of Pakistan. Actually no one else represented the tone, tenor and temper of the romanticist, Khilafatist era (in the 1910s and 1920s) as he did in his hectic life, his revolutionary activities his numerous discomfitures, and in his tragic death.

Whether he led a hectic life, whether he took recourse to a revolutionary path, or whether he goaded himself to die a tragic death outside the frontiers of his motherland cataclysmically, in whatever he did, he, consciously or unconsciously, carried forward the campaign of Indo-Muslim history: the redemption of Islam in India and abroad. In other words, he stood, above all, for an honourable existence for Muslims in India and in the rest of the troubled Muslim world in the existential crisis that convulsed Muslim India and that world.

This campaign he had headed during the post-loyalist, *Khilafat* era, immediately before and after the First World War; and to this campaign he had dedicated himself wholesouedly all through his life. ‘And of his greatness consists in [just] being there’, in courageously

* Prof. Sharif al Mujahid is an HEC Distinguished National Professor and the only recipient of the President’s Award for Best Books on Quaid-i-Azam for his work *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation* (1981). He has co-edited Unesco’s *History of Humanity Vol. VI*, and *The Jinnah Anthology* (3rd edn., 2010), and edited *In Quest of Jinnah* (2007), the only oral history on Pakistan’s founding father. He is also Consultant / Advisor, Jinnah Resource Centre, The Jinnah Society, Karachi.

directing it, in zealously dedicating himself to it, in joyously suffering for it – physically, psychologically and materially.

Early Phase

Bom (Rampur, 1879) in purple, but cradled in adversity (his father having died a year later), young Muhammad Ali was educated and trained under the benign influence of his stolid and stoic mother, the Bi Amma of the Khilafat movement. After the fashion of the age in which he was born, he received education at the *maktab*, later at the M.A.O. School and College at Aligarh, and, still later, at Oxford, but failed to secure a place in the Indian Civil Service.

Till 1911, when he entered public life, he held a number of important posts in various states, and was deeply involved with his *alma mater*, having belonged to its first generation. He was also associated with the All India Muslim League (AIML) since its founding in 1906 and had helped to popularize it. Much later (1913), he collaborated with Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) and Wazir Hasan (1874-1947), the indefatigable and long serving AIML Secretary, to get the Muslim League disenchanted from its erstwhile loyalist embrace and, at Jinnah's instance, got the twin goals of self government and Hindu-Muslim unity incorporated in its plank. Thus, the AIML was brought in line with the Indian National Congress (f. 1885).

Early in 1911 Muhammad Ali launched his weekly *Comrade* — ‘comrade of all and partisan of none’ – from Calcutta. Then the capital of India. Remarkably though, it was immediately acclaimed as a ‘new star in the firmament of Indian journalism’. Later, he also founded the *Hamdard* to reach his message to the Urdu knowing public, the Muslim middle class. For their free and frank criticism of the bureaucracy and its ‘mad ways’, both these papers were first black-listed and, subsequently, their open and bold espousal of the Turkish cause during the First World War got them officially subjected to their suppression.

Radical transformation

Interestingly though, Muhammad Ali did not start out on his public career with bitterness towards the British. But, ere long, he lost faith in British promises, British justice, British conduct, even as his coreligionists did. In retrospect, the annulment of the Partition of Bengal (1911), the British complicity in the Italo-Turkish (1911) and the Balkan (1912-14) wars, British opposition to the upgrading of the Aligarh Muslim College (1910-12), to a university status, and, finally, the Cawnpore Mosque affair (1913) – all these had a hugely deleterious impact on Anglo-Muslim relations in India. The breaking of a plighted

word on the Partition issue, the gross injustice to the Turks, the setback to the onward march of Muslim education, and the misconduct in Cawnpore finally and irrevocably conspired to wean the Muslims away from Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's and Muhsin-ul-Mulk's loyalist plank and hurtled them headlong onto an unchartered anti-British, pan-Islamic-cum-nationalist course.

The radical transformation that Indian Muslims had undergone during 1911-14 had turned Muhammad Ali into a revolutionary and the foremost symbol and spokesman of their revolutionary fervour. For good or ill, he was now in clash and conflict with the government, more often than not, and to his end. And he came to be widely acknowledged as the stormy petrel of Indian politics.

Inevitably, he wholesouledly took up the cause of the Turks which, he thought, was Islam's too. To its espousal he dedicated himself and his papers. The fate and choice of the Turks became the sole determinant of his future policy and programme. And he was obsessed with this and the dismaying fortunes of the fast crumbling Ottoman empire to a point that it goaded him inevitably and inexorably to a fire-eating revolutionary role, reach incomparable dizzy heights, and, consequently, to a hectic life of storm, strife and sacrifice.

Supreme leader

This new phase came in the wake of the First World War when he (along with his brother, Shaukat Ali) was interned, and his paper suppressed for his bold, fiery and brilliant reply to the *London Times'* leading article, 'The Choice of the Turks'. And by the time they were released on 15 December 1919, the *Khilafat* agitation was already in full swing. No wonder, they decided to ride the crest of the movement and were, in turn, readily accepted as *the leaders*. For the next four years Muhammad Ali became the supreme leader, and an idol *par excellence*, inspiring Muslims to endless strivings and supreme sacrifices in the cause of Islam, the *Khilafat* and Indian independence.

In 1920 he led a delegation to England to present the Indian Muslim viewpoint on the Allied Turkish treaty of *Severs* and the *Khilafat*. Disappointed in his mission and back from the continent, he, in concert with Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), launched the *Khilafat-cum-non-cooperation* movement. He toured the country far and wide, reaching the *Khilafat* message to the farthest corner, and the people readily responded to his call as never before. Indeed, a revolution had overtaken India: people not only said quit to government sponsored educational institutions, to government service, to courts, to titles, but they also demonstrated, and joyously courted arrests. Muhammad Ali

himself was arrested, tried for 'sedition' at Khaliqdina Hall, Karachi, and gaoled.

However, romantic and out of tune with the objective realities as the movement was, it was in its very nature that it should not succeed. To his eternal credit, Gandhi, to whom the Muslims had deliberately surrendered the movement's supreme leadership, if only in order to win over Hindu cooperation, kept the emotion-laden movement peaceful and non-violent, keeping a close check on violence, whether physical or verbal. And when it did finally go out of hand, as in the bloody Chauri Chaura incident on 5 February 1922, when an agitated mob burnt alive a dozen or more policemen who had taken refuge in a police station, he had the courage of conviction to call off the movement on 12 February. And once disbanded, however temporarily, the movement lost its tempo, and could never be revived. Most of Gandhi's colleagues have disagreed with him, for his critical decision, castigating him for having lost a moment of opportunity for dismantling the British citadel. But, in retrospect, Gandhiji was not too far wrong in his assessment, and in damming the movement in time, to preclude its spiraling itself into unmitigated violence and unremitted anarchy.

But, perhaps, what pained Muhammad Ali more was the bleak situation as it presently developed in India and in the rest of the Muslim world. For, by 1924, the Turks had decided upon a nationalist dispensation for themselves while the Arabs had opted for such a dispensation eight years earlier – in the Arab Revolt of 1916. For now, the Arabs faced a division of their lands between France and Britain (under whose inspiration and encouragement the Arabs had insisted upon their separation from the Ottoman Empire during the First World War) and the spectre of the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, while Ghazi Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the hero of the Turkish 'war of liberation' (1919-22), abolished the institution of *Khilafat* itself and sent the last caliph into exile, bag and baggage, on 3 March 1924. And all this much to the chagrin of Indian Muslims and the rest of the Muslim world. In any case, the Turkish decision (1924) was a stab in the back of the Indian *Khilafat* movement, denuding it of its very *raison de'etre* and the *Khilafat* leaders of their most basic and telling appeal.

But the *Khilafat* Conference, of which Muhammad Ali was the supremo, lingered on and met periodically till his death. The conference in Lahore, in late December 1929, caused a stir and registered a major contribution when its reception committee Chairman, Nawab Sir Muhammad Zulfikar Ali Khan (1875- 1933), proposed exclusion of demographically dominant non-Muslim areas such as Ambala to get the Muslim provinces more homogeneous and more Muslim concentrated. He

also called for partition of the subcontinent into Muslim majority and Hindu majority regions. And this was the first time that the partition proposal was raised formally from a political platform. Allama Iqbal, besides a host of Muslim luminaries, were present on the occasion. This address, which was reported extensive *Inqilab* (Lahore) on 3 January 1930, came one year before the consolidated north western state proposal was presented by Iqbal at the Muslim League's Allahabad session in December 1930.

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's rise to the echelon of Muslim League's leadership in Bengal in the 1930s also underlines the popularity of the *Khilafat* Conference long after Ataturk had aborted the *Khilafat* institution itself since Suhrawardy owed his popularity for his role as the *Khilafat* Committee's Secretary in Bengal.

Even so much to his dismay, Muhammad Ali found his erstwhile Hindu colleagues and non-cooperators launching upon, or openly supporting, or at least tacitly approving the anti-Muslim *Shuddhi* and *Sangathan* movements. More tragic: the two communities which he along with Gandhi had done so much to bring on a common platform in the *Khilafat* movement, had become antagonistic as never before, flying at each other's throats on an ever-increasing scale. Above all, he found that the Congress itself had, in the meantime, disowned its 'national' credo and grown exceedingly communal.

Dawn of realism

Tragic indeed was this and his situation. In order to serve Islam, both abroad and inside the country, he had taken up the cause of *Khilafat*, and of Hindu-Muslim unity, which he along with others considered the condition for Indian freedom. But, for now, in the Muslim world, his *Khilafat* ideal stood repudiated, and in India, his Hindu-Muslim unity plank sundered. This two-pronged disillusionment awakened him (and Muslim India) to a new sense of realism. And they finally came to the conclusion that should Muslims wish to carve out a destiny of their own, a destiny commensurate with their due status under the Indian cosmos, they should take to the path of self-reliance and should become the sole arbiters of their destiny. This led to the calling, among others, of the All-parties Muslim Conference (APMC) on 1 January 1929 under the redoubtable Aga Khan at Lahore, and the formulation of minimum Muslim demands in more precise terms. And this as a counter to the Nehru Report (1928), the Congress's blue print for the future Indian constitution, which *inter alia* had repudiated the Lucknow Pact of 1916 and the Muslim right to separate electorate. For now the Maulana owned up the APMC resolution and, later, Jinnah's Fourteen Points (1929). His views on the Hindu-Muslim question and on the future polity of India were succinctly set forth, among

others, in his addresses to the (first) Round Table Conference (1930-31) and his letter to the prime Minister on 1 January 1930.

‘It is a misnomer to call the Hindu-Muslim question a question of minorities’, he declared. ‘A community that in India alone must now be numbering more than 70 million’, he argued, ‘cannot easily be called a minority in the sense of Geneva minorities...’. Moreover, he demanded that ‘in Muslim provinces, Muslims should be allowed to have their majority — as the Hindus have everywhere else’; and that ‘the Central Unitary Government should not over-ride them [Muslims] everywhere’.

This was Maulana Muhammad Ali's last political testament, as he discussed the Indian constitutional problem on his death-bed at the Round Table Conference on 1 January 1931. Three days later, this ailing delegate to the conference was dead. And with him had passed away the foremost Muslim revolutionary of the age. And in concurrence with the *Mufti* of Jerusalem, his mortal remains were later taken to Palestine and buried in the Masjid al-Aqsa. And that obviously in recognition of his services to Islam, and Palestine.

Conclusion

Great as Maulana Mohammad Ali was as an orator and writer, as a leader of men and as a freedom fighter, he was equally great as a man. The Maulana had such ‘a juxtaposition of grace and brilliance with tremendous and deadly earnestness’ that it induced Sir C. P. Ramswamy Iyer, one-time Dewan of Travancore, to hail him in eloquent terms:

‘A man of varied learning, a fine and effective speaker, and wielder of a style which can be delicate as well as trenchant, above all, an idealist who strove to revivify Muhammadan public life and breathe reality into its political activities, Muhammad Ali will always be counted as one of the creators of the New Islamic spirit in India’.

The Maulana, it is rightly said, ‘had the heart of Napoleon, the tongue of Burke and the pen of Macaulay’. But, above all, he was every inch a Muslim. And this is the key to his personality, to his achievements as well as to his actions, however misguided they might seem – as, for instance, his agitation for the shut-down of Aligarh, the premier Muslim educational institution. In the early 1920s, no one else had wielded such an enormous influence over the Muslim masses, inspired them to such energetic action and goaded them to such supreme sacrifices. He was the man of the hour, the man of their destiny. And his contribution to the evolution of Indo-Muslim politics was such that

...till the future dares

Forget the past, his fate and fame shall be,

An echo and a light unto eternity.