Author:	Malik, Jamal
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Toward Historicizing an Indian Nationalist Salafī

The Case of Abū l-Kalām Āzād

Jamal Malik

Introduction

Abū l-Kalām Ghulām Muḥyī l-Dīn (remembered as Maulana Āzād) was born in 1888 into a Ṣūfī family in the Wahhābī environment of Mecca, where he spent his early childhood. As the son of an Indian Ṣūfī shaikh and his Arab wife, so the story goes, Abū l-Kalām's mixed racial heritage and homeschooling inculcated in him the moral and cultural values of Islamic cosmopolitanism. In 1898 his father left Mecca and brought the family to Calcutta. During his teenage years in fin-de-siècle Calcutta, the second capital of Britain's global empire and cradle of the Bengal Renaissance, Ghulām Muḥyī l-Dīn discovered and nurtured a passionate patriotism, which also induced in him a strong affinity with anti-colonial politics. In fact, for him the anti-colonial movement came to form part and parcel of an Islamic vocation and an ethical imperative, accompanied by a growing thirst for action.

Abū l-Kalām's initiation into politics came at the age of seventeen, during the turmoil that followed the 1905 Partition of Bengal. Having witnessed the rise of communalist movements, he harbored an intense Muslim nationalist fervor until 1920, when his involvement in the Hijrat (Muslim emigration) movement ended with its debacle. After this failure, his nationalist stance shifted from an Islamicist one to a more moderate, docile and realistic approach. In 1923, a year before the final collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, Abū l-Kalām rose by way of various forms of political maneuvering to become the youngest president of the Indian National Congress.

• *Acknowledgment:* This paper represents a substantially revised version of Malik 2014.

The meandering course of modern Indian political history, along with political discrimination against him and a series of imprisonments, strengthened Āzād's anti-colonial nationalist position. In 1954 he became the first Minister of Education in the Indian government, a post he held until his death in 1958. In 1992 he was posthumously awarded India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. In light of all the relevant historical political intricacies, how can we best interpret the fascinating and ambiguous (if not contradictory) phases of Āzād's biography, his oscillations between Salafism and secularism?

Toward an Āzādian Historiographical Paradigm

So much has been written on Maulana Abū l-Kalām Āzād, the doyen of composite nationalism, that the task of identifying an original starting point is challenging. Yet the notion of a "historiographical paradigm" for the dialectic of his biography offers a possibility for viewing the Maulana in a new light. The twists and turns of his turbulent life have been characterized as involving a radical metamorphosis, a series of contradictions and antitheses, and so on.[1] Ian Henderson Douglas has argued that, for Āzād, "If there were inconsistencies, he was simply unaware of them. He could keep each compartment of his mind separate from the other."[2] However, allegations of religio-political discrepancies and cognitive compartmentalization cannot do justice to this cosmopolitan figure. Instead, one must endeavor to grasp the processes of understanding that informed his personal development. In this paper, I shall touch on only a few of the relevant considerations.

In the first place, generational conflict with his Ṣūfī father, Khayr al-Dīn Dihlawi (1831–1908), who had settled in Mecca and married an Arab, resulted in Abū l-Kalām's initial break with the paternal Qādirī and Naqshbandī traditions. This led eventually to his appreciation of a cultural "other," namely, the Arabian Wahhābiyya. Upon his family's return to India, he followed up with a thorough reading of the works of the deist and reformer Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817–1898), who had toyed with the idea of a cooperative Muslim minority in colonial India and eventually had become convinced that only *ashrāf* like himself could serve as natural leaders of the Muslim community. After Aḥmad Khān's death, the movement he founded emerged as the vanguard of

1 One early endeavor to make sense of Āzād's idiosyncrasy is H. Malik 1963.
2 Douglas 1988:251.

politicized Muslims and may be regarded as "the source of modernist and rational thinking among the Muslim elite and ... the catalyst for latter-day Muslim political 'separatism' and 'communalism.'"[3] Arguably, though Abū l-Kalām's early self-assertion may have been an expression of youthful defiance, Khān's reflections played a key role in this important period.

The fifteen-year-old Ghulām Muḥyī l-Dīn made his explosive debut with the journal *Lisān al-Ṣidq* (1903–1905). His contribution was duly appreciated by such contemporary giants of Muslim thought and literature as Shiblī Nu'mānī (1857–1914) and Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī (1837–1914). Their support may have been what prompted him to enter the political arena at the first conference of the Muslim League in Dacca in 1906. However, it did not prevent the young man from another rebellion after his father's death in 1908, during which he briefly indulged in open agnosticism.[4] Only in 1910 did he begin to retreat from this intriguing shore, upon reading the teachings of Ṣūfī Sarmad the Martyr (1590–1661). By now Abū l-Kalām had adopted the pen name Āzād, "free." Arguably, this choice was intended to demonstrate his independence from paternal influence and the concomitant framework of conventions and traditions.

The following period in Abū l-Kalām's life was characterized by Islamic political and religious activism in the face of current events, as epitomized in his famous pan-Islamic Urdu journal *al-Hilāl* (*The Crescent*, 1910–1914). Much later, after further study and deliberation, he would write *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān* (*Interpreter of the Qur'ān*, 1931–1936), which instead reflected a nationalist vision. Finally, his collection of letters called *Ghubār-e khāṭir* (*The Dust of Memories*, 1946) marked yet another stage of development. Interspersed with these periods Abū l-Kalām endured several terms of imprisonment[5] – forced retreats from political activism that provided him with the chance to reevaluate events from behind bars.

The turbulent religio-political reality of colonial and post-colonial India, with its Muslim minority of approximately 150 million adhering to different and competing denominations, could potentially be negotiated in a number of ways. These ranged from assimilating Islam into the dominant social order, with a concomitant appreciation for the secular

3 Jalal 1997:82.
4 Douglas 1988:95.
5 In 1916–1920, 1921–1923, 1928 and 1942–1945.

rules of discourse, to understanding Islam as a progressively expounded autonomous realm, with theological norms claiming validity over society. The latter option referenced transcendence to undercut concepts of social order and aimed at competition with – and even elimination of – secular convictions. The proven devices by which religion might be shaped to dominate society, or, alternatively, be subsumed within society, were strategic imitation, structural amnesia, and imaginative remembrance and visualization of the past. Let us turn to a closer examination of these different discursive fields, which were compounded by the looming idea of Muslim minority status.

Āzād and Sarmad[6]

In 1910 the editor of the Urdu periodical *Niẓām al-Mashāyikh*, Khwājah Ḥasan Niẓāmī (1878–1957), asked Āzād to write a piece on Sarmad Kāshānī. The 22-year-old took the project as an opportunity to idealize India's pluralist past, which he saw as hampered by religious zealots,[7] and the resulting early historical work on the Ṣūfī Sarmad seems also to have set the ideological boundaries for his future activities.

An Armenian Jew from Kāshān in Khurāsān who had converted to Islam, Sarmad arrived in India as a trader and settled in Thatta around 1631. In accordance with the Ṣūfī path, Sarmad, "the eternal," renounced all worldliness and went "naked, covered with thick curly hair all over his body and [with] long nails on his fingers."[8] As described by Thomas William Beal in the late nineteenth century, Sarmad was

> a man of reason, wisdom, knowledge who had attained gnosis; he excelled all men of gnosis. To what spiritual order he belonged only God knows, but what we do know is that he scarified his life for the sake of his beloved God.[9]

6 For an interesting though slightly exaggerated view on the intellectual and emotional relationship between Azād and Sarmad see Datta 2007.

7 See Āzād 1912.

8 Gupta 2010:24–25. This narrative follows the tradition transmitted by Mu'tamad Khān (d. 1639), author of *Iqbāl Nāma-ye Jahāngīrī* (which served as the literary model for the *Tūzuk-e Jahāngīrī*). Mu'tamad Khān met Sarmad in Lahore in 1634.

9 Quoted in Gupta 2010:24–25.

Sarmad's inclusivist teachings became a bone of contention, and in 1661 the last (effective) Grand-Mughal, Awrangzēb (1618–1707), ordered him executed in Shahjahanabad.

Āzād celebrated this martyr as an embodiment of all-embracing wisdom and peaceful coexistence, whose "fate was bound to the market of love and beauty, where the accepted currency is not gold and silver but the fragments of broken hearts."[10] The eternal renouncer's[11] conception of the renouncement of the self and its merging with the Supreme Being seems to have served as a blueprint for pluralism in Āzād's work.

In Abū l-Kalām's perception, Sarmad aspired to achieve ultimate detachment. He defied the "blind dogmatists" and the "moribund interpretation of Islam" of those who dwelled only on "pedantic discussions on kufr and faith" and used religion merely to camouflage political designs. Āzād decried the use of the *ulama*'s most lethal weapon, the *fatwā*, to denounce political positions as religious heresy[12] – a statement well placed in a journal addressed to mystic divines (*mashāyikh*).

According to tradition, Sarmad was put to the executioner's sword at the age of seventy, after being accused of public nudity, close friendship with Awrangzēb's major rival, Dārā Shukōh (1615–1659), and apostasy. The last of these charges stemmed from his refusal to utter the *kalima*:

> I am yet drowned in the state of negativity (*naïf*) and have not yet arrived at the higher state of positivism (*isbat*). If I pronounce Illl Laha it would be a lie. How can that which is not inside your heart be articulated by the tongue?[13]

By the same token, Āzād preferred the purported humility of Dārā Shukōh, who had called Sarmad "my guru and instructor," over the severity of Awrangzēb, whom he viewed as a violent suppressor of truth.[14] A constantly re-emerging theme in Āzād's writings is that

10 Āzād 1991:24.

11 On the notion of a "renouncer," see Dumont 1980:267–286; and Tambiah 1998:299–320.

12 Āzād 1991:33.

13 Āzād in Gupta 2010:58. The odd transliterations are in the original.

14 Scholars have questioned and reevaluated Dārā Shukōh's traditional profile as a Ṣūfī, his purported humility and his written insights (which turn out to be predominantly shallow). Āzād's allegiance in this case may perhaps hint at the way in which he would later develop his own thoughts on religion, humanism

indulgence towards the insane is preferable to a coterie of the rational and sane. "In the latter case, the sword of vigilance has been dyed in the blood of lovers, while in the former, blood flowed freely from the severed veins of lovers' necks."[15] Abū l-Kalām anticipated that future historians would give no more than a passing glance to Awrangzēb's conquests when reviewing the past:

> Instead, they will cry tears of blood at the crushing defeat of this mighty Mughal on the battlefield of truth. The defeat that was caused by placing on the scaffold the venerable head of a lover and a Sufi saint.[16]

These well-defined articulations on religion had substantial political undertones. In addition, however, Sarmad provided Āzād with the opportunity to deal with his own painful journey along the path of rationality, religious norms and spirituality, and to give expression to a voice hitherto silenced but now free to speak out of a "lonely heart." Sarmad represented peaceful cohabitation, as he "stood on that minaret of love from which the walls of Kaaba and temple were of equal height and where the flags of belief and disbelief waved together."[17] Like Sarmad, who had rejected narrow conventions, Āzād now felt unleashed. He too "had not yet reached the stage of affirmation"; his only solution lay in redemption: either martyrdom or *jihād* for the sake of God (*jihād fī sabīl Allāh*)!

Such ingenious appropriations of religion and reception of traditions cannot be termed marginal to the overall tradition or societal praxis at large. Rather, they actually constitute the tradition and contribute to the completion of the religious images that they constantly revise. Similarly, myths and legends amount to "fundamental figures of memory," as Jan Assmann has put it, since "their constant repetition and actualization is one of the ways in which a society or culture affirms its identity."[18] Though Āzād probably did not inquire into the complex

and nationalism. On a different note, Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938) praised Awrangzēb endlessly, regarding him as the only ruler who understood that the essence of governance lay in the strength of the ruling class and not in the goodwill of the people.

15 Āzād 1991:31.
16 Āzād 1991:20.
17 Troll 1992:39.
18 Assmann 2003:10.

processes by which the plains of memory mutate into a habitat, he did seem to have at least some idea of the intricacies of mnemohistory:

> In modern times, people do not believe such tales. But we have seen flowers in full bloom conversing with the withered branches of trees dried by autumn. Where is then the occasion to wonder if some people saw moving the lips of a person whose head had been cut off?[19]

Āzād clearly believed in the possibility of the impossible, for he came to see destiny linked with conviction as a powerful weapon[20] at a time when political Islam was emerging.

The Sarmadian episteme harked back to a shared tradition based in liberal Ṣūfī discourses and a flexible interpretation of Islamic law befitting the Indian Islamicate environment.[21] As Muzaffar Alam has shown, this *akhlāqī* or ethical trend stood in contrast to the *adab* tradition, which defended the norms of *sharī'a* in their narrow juridical sense.[22] However, in Douglas's words, "pragmatic concerns of the moment were more urgent for him than constructing a consistent philosophical scheme."[23] Hence, the following *al-Hilāl* period would pose some significant ideological challenges to that epistemological background, as messianic thinking vested with divine authority blazed a trail toward radical change.[24]

Āzād the Messiah

Āzād found himself excited by the constant appreciation of Muslim intellectuals and spurred on by "storm and stress," coupled with an elitist approach and egotism.[25] Under the overwhelming influence of

19 Āzād in Gupta 2010:69.
20 Gupta 2010:73.
21 "Islamicate" (in contrast to Islamic) culture refers to a phenomenon that refers primarily not to religion, "but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." Hodgson 1974:59. See also Gilmartin and Lawrence 2002.
22 See Alam 2008; Walzer 1986.
23 Douglas 1988:190.
24 Douglas 1988:96.
25 Douglas (1988:260) states that Āzād's "greatest bondage was to himself" and that he kept himself very much aloof from the common man (1988:278).

Sarmad, the clean-shaven Āzād now felt the urge to take the lead in the Indian-Muslim drama, hitherto led by *'ulamā-ye waqt* rather than by *'ulamā-ye ḥaqq* – respectively, in Āzād's parlance, opportunist religious scholars and righteous religious scholars.

Eschatology plays a central role in the Qur'ān (84:1–2 and elsewhere); it belongs to the kernel of Muḥammad's prophecy, reminding believers of the looming doomsday. Broadly speaking, messianic movements nourish the hope of reforming and altering the societal fabric; they draw their expectation from situations of crisis in which prophetic messengers appear to promise a millennial empire. The messiah figure concentrates in his own person that very sense of crisis, seeking solidarity with the destiny of society. These aspects are compounded by the experience of a visionary and auditory mission and an assignment to collective and salvific action. Apocalyptic expectation renders the messiah a person of the future who is expected to release the people from the enemy's yoke. Thus, notions of the messiah essentially represent inverted images of authority: Rather than expressing the repressive rights of the ruler, they give voice to the subjects' claim to autonomy. The concept of the messiah, or for that matter the *mahdī*, thus represents an emancipative modification of existing ideas. The chosen one is sacred; his line of attack is the center of power.[26] This is the context that prompts messianic movements worldwide to come up with alternative perceptions of the past that can provide an orientation for the future.

Such ideas suited Āzād's own project quite well, as he was preoccupied with authority anyway: Prophets, reformers and spiritual leaders played a major role in his assessments, especially from 1910 to 1920. The figure of the *mujaddid*, well known in Islamic tradition, provided Āzād with the necessary ground for yet another *tajdīd* ("renewal"). The Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)[27] had already initiated the hope that doomsday could be "postponed indefinitely if religion were revitalized on the eve of every century."[28] In the sixteenth century CE (the tenth in the *hijrī* calendar), Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564–1624) radically reinvigorated this notion of recurrence.[29] Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad of Qādiyān (1835–1908), founder of the Aḥmadiyya Movement, had

26 Compare Kippenberg 1990.

27 On al-Suyūṭī and his relevance in this connection, see also Meier 1985. For a historical and biographical contextualization, see Sartain 1975.

28 Friedmann 1971:14.

29 On Sirhindi, see ten Haar 1992; Friedmann 1971. For the boom in sixteenth-century millennial movements, see Subrahmanyam 2005.

already rung the bell of messianism, layering this ideology with stark non-Western and anti-traditionalist components. Āzād apparently was quite taken by such ideas; in 1908 he published a laudatory obituary on Ghulām Aḥmad in the Amritsar-based Urdu journal *al-Wakīl*.[30]

During the next ten years, from 1910 until his imprisonment in 1921, Abū l-Kalām felt that he had personally received a divine calling. Initially, *al-Hilāl* served as the channel for developing the religious style required to emotionalize the reader with the language of a "high-souled prophet."[31] As Shiblī Nu'mānī's student Sulaymān Nadwī (1884–1953) recollected, "He sounded loudly and fiercely the trumpet of *jihād*, whose name people were afraid to mention, so that the forgotten lesson was on the tongues of people again."[32]

Āzād's announcement of the founding of a "Party of God" (*ḥizb Allāh*) in 1913 was intended to generate a new type of solidarity – beyond traditional loyalties to the notion of a radical renewal of the world – and not merely to restore the "good old days." His invocation of Salafī heroes included characters as varied as Ibn Ḥanbal (780–855), Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350), who had rejected Mu'tazilī thought, that is, reason in the first instance, as well as traditional religious practices, that is, practical Sufism, including the veneration of tombs. Āzād's writing juxtaposed the anti-Hindu reformer Aḥmad Sirhindī and the Islamic scholar Shah Waliullah (1703–1762) with the doyen of pan-Islamism, al-Afghānī (1838–1897), his student Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), and especially Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), whom he termed "The Great Reformer and Wise Leader."[33] This genealogy helped him develop his political ideas in the light of a profound Islamic heritage and nationalist struggle. The Maulana never could shed his sympathy for the Salafī position of a pure, de-culturalized Islam, though it ran against the Sarmadian notion. However, strategic imitation and invocative visualization of the past remained essential to his historiographical project.

By 1920, Āzād's socio-religious capital had peaked, and he could afford to join the nonviolent non-cooperation movement led by M.K. Gandhi (1869–1948) while at the same time agitating for armed resistance (*jihād*) if non-cooperation failed. According to traditional

30 For excerpts in English translation, see Lahore Aḥmadiyya Movement 2013.
31 Douglas 1988:99.
32 Nadwī in Douglas 1988:100.
33 Douglas 1988:107–108.

Islamic thought, if all hope for successful *jihād* was lost and it became unsafe to remain in a certain non-Islamic territory, the remaining option would be to emigrate. Āzād later denied involvement in issuing a religious degree to that effect – that is, one that declared India *dār al-ḥarb*. However, he did provide the organizers of the Hijrat Campaign with the *hijrat kā fatwā* published in July 1920.[34] The ensuing emigration of approximately 18,000 Muslims to Afghanistan, which ended in disaster for the migrants, was a tragic offshoot of the Khilāfat Movement and dealt a first heavy blow to Abū l-Kalām's political career.

His subsequent imprisonment from late 1921 to 1923 must have given him ample time to reflect on the consequences of the *fatwā*, on the different theaters of war flaring up around the Muslim-Hindu entente and on the collapse of the Khilāfat and non-cooperation movements, along with the ultimate abolishment of the Caliphate in March 1924. During this time he worked on his *Tadhkirah*, a sort of autobiography, in which he praised staunch Muslims like Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad Sirhindī, Shāh Waliullah and also the puritan preacher Sayyid Aḥmad Barēlwī (1786–1831). The work manifests a preoccupation with Sirhindī, thereby not only reintroducing him to mainstream Muslim cultural memory but also likely providing Āzād with the necessary epistemological ground to rationalize his own messianic tendencies. In this crisis situation, the peripheral and excluded figure of Sarmad re-emerged in Āzād's constructions of the meaningful. Āzād's trial before a British tribunal in 1922 seemed anticipated by his depiction of Sarmad's trial before the court of Awrangzēb. In his defense speech, the Maulana similarly portrayed himself as a victim of injustice, fiercely threatening that the tyrannical government would be tried in the court of God's law.[35] Such bold statements must have enlivened nationalist sentiments and support for Āzād personally as a hero of the struggle for Indian independence. In 1923, a year before the collapse of the Caliphate, he became the youngest president of the Indian National Congress, at only thirty-five years old.

Little is known of Āzād's confinements. They represent a sort of *barzakh* (Qur'ān 23:101), an interface or barrier between two states, or a phase of "cold sleep," as it were. However, the disciplinary power of the prison authorities must have exerted a significant effect upon him. The inmates faced a highly regimented daily schedule, with constant

34 For the *fatwā* see Qureshi 1999:188ff.
35 Troll 1992:37; see also Troll 1989:113, 128.

observation and recording. This must have ensured the internalization of a disciplinary individuality through which the prisoners were controlled. In Foucauldian terms, the transgression of rules or laws becomes more unlikely when one feels watched, regardless of whether such observation is actually taking place. "The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation."[36] Upon Āzād's release in 1923, his Islamicist zeal seems to have vanished. He had evidently abandoned all ambitions of becoming an *imām, amīr* or *mujaddid* of the Muslims. Instead, he began to look to values other than those attached to immediate political freedom, pleading, for instance, for "principles of humanity within ourselves."[37] He had realized that religiously motivated emigration would be futile and counterproductive. Engaging in routine political activities, he began to promulgate a faith capable of enduring hardship and even death, of the kind essential to the teachings of Gandhi and possibly reminiscent of Sarmad's destiny as well.

Āzād's next project was his two-volume Urdu translation of and commentary on the Qur'ān, which he completed only up to Sura 23. It represents an exercise in structural amnesia, an attempt to blot out the dark sides of human – especially Islamic – history. Āzād argues for *waḥdat-e dīn*, a single path according with God's universal law of felicity (*'ālamgīr qānūn-e sa'ādat*), aimed at a life of good deeds (*'amal-e ṣāliḥ*). Here God figures as the great provider (*rabb*) who nourishes His creation like a mother.[38]

After 1940 Āzād decided not to complete this apologetic narration but instead to "paint a broader canvas in *Ghubār-e khāṭir*."[39] He wrote but never dispatched this series of letters to Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān Khān Shērwānī (d. 1950).[40] In twenty-four epistles composed in Urdu of an extraordinary high standard, Āzād gave voice to his own originality and self-importance, claiming:

> In religion, in literature, in politics, in everyday thought, wherever I have to go, I have to go alone. On no path can I go with the

36 Foucault 1982:170.
37 Douglas 1988:193.
38 Sharma 1991:10 (citing Āzād).
39 Douglas 1988:262.
40 Raḥmān was an early member of the Nadwat al-'ulamā', and thus a comrade-in-arms. See Malik 1997:228ff., *passim*.

> caravans of the day ... Whichever way I walk, I get so far ahead of the [caravan] that when I turn to look back, I see nothing but the dust of the way, and even that is the dust raised by the speed of my own passage.[41]

He saw himself as an anachronism, misplaced in his time.[42]

Sarmad seems to remain the one and only constant capable of epistemologically bracketing Āzād's different and disparate biographical phases, so dramatically separated by solitude, introspection and the disciplining he experienced in detention. The Maulana's career evinces an evolutionary, incremental vision that grew in tandem with the evolving political and religious scenarios in colonial and post-colonial India. This evolution may best be traced in his notion of historiography.

Āzād's Historiographical Project

As Douglas put it, Āzād "was a sadly misunderstood man, but one who, even with the best of will, is hard to understand."[43] Since he was well aware of the roles played by history and historiography, a glance at his own historiographical project may help to make his entire oeuvre more legible. Although he never penned a comprehensive historical narrative, he did attempt to contextualize written testimonies and their authors. He also tried to apply a scientific and creative hermeneutical approach to the problem of interpreting history. However, he did not assign much value to archival records or facts themselves as a tool for analyzing history. In his view, a slavish and excessive utilization of facts would extinguish the spark of light that illuminates a historical text. Historical accuracy thus gave way to emotional effect in his writings.

With respect to his engagement with history, Āzād functioned essentially as an artist rather than a scholar. For him, historiography represented a living, creative and aesthetic experience, a process of self-articulation in which all individual factors, including categories like Muslim or Hindu, were essentially marginal. His idiosyncratic visions of history cut across the great secular-religious divide; in his portrayal, events at all levels and in all possible societal forms constituted but a self-reflection or self-expression of the continuous movement of history

41 Douglas 1988:232f.
42 Āzād 1983:9.
43 Douglas 1988:252.

itself. Far from being, as Jawaharlal Nehru saw him, "essentially the scholar whom circumstances have forced into a life of action,"[44] Āzād was essentially a political activist whom circumstances forced into a life of scholarship.

As Āzād had already asked in his piece on Sarmad, how could tradition be separated from history? How could facts be seen in isolation, when history was "a compendium of surmises, doubts and personal expressions"?[45] He seems to have understood well that writing history, far from being an unpretentious and unemotional fact-finding mission, is a process of conceptualization, reconstruction and renarration accomplished by referring to specific notions of the past. For Āzād, that past harked back not only to the tradition of the Prophet Muḥammad, but also to Hindu traditions. In his historiographical writing, the imaginative anamnesis in his work on Sarmad is as insightful as the strategic mimesis found in *al-Hilāl* or the structural amnesia in *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*.

Furthermore, Āzād bestowed life on hitherto silenced voices, such as the seventeenth-century mystic Sarmad, the students from Nadwat al-'ulamā' who went on strike in March 1914,[46] and the cryptic work known as *Tarīkh-e Ghadr-e Hindustān* (*History of the Indian Rebellion*).[47] By giving agency to antiheroes who would otherwise have remained repressed and obscure, he simultaneously provided himself and his sharp pen with apt opportunities to skewer his opponents, using the literary techniques of contextual alienation and distancing.

This historiographical approach was not unique to Āzād. We know that writing history or constructing the past has always been an influential source of authority and self-assertion, as well as coercion. By adopting a self-referential normative function in people's collective memory, it may amount to a process of self-canonization. This is particularly true in conditions of uncertainty, when historians, or those pretending to be historians, tend for various reasons to historicize or de-historicize their environment in order to set limits and draw boundaries, to overcome differences and create shared traditions. Historicization is always informed by the past, enmeshed in the questions and interests of the present and intended to serve the future. As Jörn Rüsen has written:

44 Quoted in Malik 1963:39.
45 Āzād 1991:40.
46 On the strike and its ramifications, see Malik 1997:365ff.
47 On this interesting composition, see Malik 2016.

> By remembering, interpreting and representing the past, peoples understand their present-day life and develop a future perspective on themselves and their world. "History" in this fundamental and anthropologically universal sense is a culture's interpretive recollection of the past serving as a means to orient the group in the present.[48]

Historiography is not simply a historical record of things that happened; what matters is the construction of the past and the potential meanings with which this construction can be invested. It is Āzād's composition of the past – as ascertainable through historical sources – that must be investigated. He was prone to invoke competing references to Salafī Islam and Islamic mysticism in constructing the past of Indian Muslims, thus arguing for a plethora of norms and concepts of agency.

The Maulana did try to transcend the painful hermeneutical aporia in Islamic scholarship that had resulted from limitations set by the standards of a soteriology that perceived history as God's saving work among his chosen people. This normative Islamic historical thinking had been informed by the master narrative that history must serve religion and law, as epitomized in the postulate of *khatm al-nubuwwa*, the final sealing of the prophethood with Muḥammad. The lack of serious hermeneutical study of the *Sīra* and Qur'anic text – leading to a silencing of variant readings, traditions, and also hermeneutical insensitivity – represents a case in point.

Once historical contingencies are taken into account, the primary question becomes "What *can* we know?"[49] rather than "What *do* we know?" Such an approach implies reflection on the complex processes of translation and of reproduction of memory structured by the present. Āzād did try to take seriously the encouragement of critical knowledge unconstrained by ecclesiastical institutional priorities. Yet as a Muslim he still stood by the Islamic discourse, claiming that the Qur'ān and the Sunna contained answers to all questions.

Like all historical narratives, Āzād's historiographical endeavors were similarly attached to the organization of knowledge, again a factor necessarily related to contemporary societal discourses. Likewise, the role of memory and of the *narration of history* as a conscious and non-naïve process in Āzād's oeuvre must be reevaluated. This is particularly

48 Rüsen 1996:8.

49 On this question, see Schöller 1998.

true given that the Maulana involved himself in a multi-layered process of validation in which the narrative inevitably became rhetorical and representation of the past took part in a discourse of power. It is worthwhile, therefore, to investigate the social location of the historical narrative and of the procedure of remembrance.

Moreover, if the validity of a historical narrative per se weakens, this implies the need to question the role of another entity, equally important for religious legitimacy as Āzād pursued it: *tradition*. Instead of simply regarding tradition as a firm and authoritative component of religious and cultural identity, the researcher may investigate the cultural and discursive limitations of what Āzād actually negotiated as tradition in his ongoing work of reconstructive imagination. In other words, it is rewarding to consider how the past in his narrative was structured by the present to serve the future.

For Āzād, given that Islam's universal appeal enriches other religions and "has no concern with sect, nationality, grandeur or poverty,"[50] traditional assumptions like "only Muslims can be redeemed" were as problematic as relying on scriptures alone for developing a political doctrine that could legitimize composite nationalism from within Islamic traditions. It was not enough to refer to Qur'ān 60:8–9, which divides non-Muslims into two categories – those who do not attack Muslims and those who do – or to count the British among the second category and Hindus among the first, as Āzād did in his presidential address at the Khilāfat Conference 1921, thereby in effect supporting the principles of non-cooperation and "unity in diversity." To those ends, Āzād even went so far as to employ the famous Covenant of Medina as a proto-constitutional ground for nationalist purposes, by translating the Arabic *umma wāḥida*, "one community," as "one nation."[51]

By this time, Āzād had come to regard composite nationalism as the logical result of Indian Muslim history, a corollary of his assessment that it represented the best option for the future of Islam in India. Thus, Āzād was first a Muslim and then an Indian. This may be seen in his presidential address to the Indian National Congress at Ramgar in 1940. In this speech he characterized his Indianness as sanctified by Islam,[52] seeking to convince his own (Muslim) community in particular

50 Āzād 1991:22.
51 Compare also Malik 1963:36–38.
52 Douglas 1988:277.

that nothing irreconcilable stood between Islam and the decolonization struggle. Yet, against the backdrop of the 1940 Lahore Resolution in favor of a separate Muslim state, adopted by the leader of the Muslim League, Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), Āzād also addressed himself to the non-Muslim members of the Congress. He asserted his pride in being a Muslim and at the same time

> part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality.... I [as a Muslim] am indispensable to this noble edifice and without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim.[53]

In his (Indian) nationalist fervor, Āzād differed from scholars such as the Deobandi Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī (1879–1957), who did not really transcend boundaries of religious difference and rejected the arguments of both Jinnah, for Islam as the basis of nationalism, and Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), who had advanced a notion of territorial nationalism. Madanī flatly disqualifies other religions: "While being aware of the truth [i.e., the reality] of their [the other religions'] falsehood, it [Islam] is ready to mingle with them, co-exist with them and even establish reciprocal ties with them."[54] He also clearly holds the view that Hindustan should ultimately be Islamized, though the English version of his *Muttaḥida qawmiyyat* tactfully omitted the key phrase *jab tak tamām Hindustān kē bāshindē musalmān na hō jā'ēñ* ("until all inhabitants of India have become Muslims").[55] Composite nationalism, claimed Madanī,

> is needed only till such time as different *aqwām* [nations] and different religions [cease to] exist in a country. When the entire nation becomes Muslim [which is the prime and real aim (*jō kih awwalīn*

53 Quoted in Malik 1963:39.

54 Madani 2005:117.

55 Madanī n.d.:55; cf. the English translation in Madani 2005:151. Compare, however, Madani 2005:139–140: "This problem will continue to bedevil India till the light of the true religion dispels its darkness." Madanī made frequent reference to the Covenant of Medina, yet his concept of composite nationalism remained narrow, drawing clear boundaries around a Sunnī Muslim identity. For further analysis of Madanī's view, see Malik 2008: chaps. 12, 15.

> *aṣlī maqṣad hay*)], where is the need for it? I have termed it "temporal and special" for this reason.[56]

Some years later, Āzād expressed severe doubts about the idea that religion could serve as the prime force for Muslim, Christian or Hindu rationality. In 1946, he reportedly went so far as to say:

> Strictly speaking, Muslims in India are not one community; they are divided among many well-entrenched sects. You can unite them by arousing their anti-Hindu sentiment but you cannot unite them in the name of Islam. To them Islam means undiluted loyalty to their own sect.[57]

Āzād thus not only declared patriotism a fundamental constituent of the religious heritage of the Muslim but also made an attempt at altering the entire discourse shaping people's imagination with reference to Hindu–Muslim relations in general.

The persistent demand for a separate state of Pakistan loomed large as a painful antithesis to the Maulana's project. He resisted this alternative rigorously, having recognized both the weakness of human nature and the ubiquitous power of religion. For Āzād, the idea of Pakistan signified a flight from Indian Muslim history into territorial independence for Muslims.[58] His opposition consisted in a criticism of the political leadership, whose alleged incompetence, he believed, would cause them to give way to military dictatorship. In addition to expressing doubts about the ability of religion to create any durable political unity, moreover, Āzād pointed to the uncertain future of some 100 million Muslims who would be left behind in India. His observations on Muslim history and the incremental vehemence of religious identity politics and communalization enabled Āzād to foresee the course of events in Pakistan. As the subsequent reality on both sides of the border amply shows, his predictions were borne out and did not even require much ingenuity or imagination.

56 Madanī n.d.:55; Madani 2005:150. The phrase in brackets is translated directly from the Urdu version.

57 Quoted in Kāshmīrī 1988.

58 Douglas 1988:277.

Āzād formulated his insights in *India Wins Freedom*[59] and allegedly restated them in an interview given to Agha Shōrish Kāshmīrī (1917–1975) of the Majlis-i Aḥrār-e Islām party in April 1946.[60] While so-called progressive Pakistanis have appreciated his views as remarkably prescient, opponents disdained Āzād's imagined freedom in an independent India. Muḥammad Iqbāl offered the following illustrative couplet in his *Żarb-e Kalīm* (*The Rod of Moses*):

> Mullah kō jō hay Hind meñ sajdē kī ijāzat
> nādān yih samajhtā hay kih islām hay āzād!
>
> In India, if the Mullah has permission for prostration,
> Our ignoramus thinks Islam has gained emancipation![61]

Conclusions

After seventy years of India's and Pakistan's tryst with destiny, the two nations are still haunted by the challenges of communalism and religious extremism, possibly in its worst and most aggressive form. Given such a reality, how many more Āzāds can we afford to sacrifice?

Many would see Abū l-Kalām's vision of Indian society and his search for communal harmony, based on the admittedly somewhat vague principles of composite culture and secular nationalism, as not only praiseworthy, but also as urgently needed in the contemporary context of communal and sectarian conflicts. If so, one may well ask: Why are the forces of composite culture so fragile that they fail to counter the growth of communal consciousness? And is the mere existence of composite culture a sufficient condition for communal harmony?

In fact, the national public sphere hardly provides a symbolic representation of composite culture. Rather, various distinct communities and groups share some stage, as illustrated by India's series of national holidays connected to different religious communities and sects. The problem with Āzād's proposal seems to lie in his limited epistemological framework, which is incapable of dealing effectively with issues of communalism and other sectarian conflicts. These limitations emerged

59 Āzād 1988.
60 See Kāshmīrī 1988.
61 Iqbāl 1936:30.

in part from his own internal dilemmas with regard to constructing an "Indian nation" out of a group of diversified nationalities, based on a specific conceptualization of nationalist historiography.

In this respect, Āzād, like many of his generation, was a victim of a colonial mode of thinking, albeit in a Nehruvian mood.[62] He tended to see the nation-state as necessarily being a homogenized entity with disciplining agency. Yet the challenge before us is how to construct a plural and pluralist nation-state that reflects the democratic aspirations of all the communities and groups involved. Perhaps this requires the construction of a notion of "multicultural citizenship" – one that may already exist de facto in India. However, the true goal surpasses that reality and the Indian "politics of hope." It demands the just distribution of societal and state resources, along with equality and recognition before the law as well as in the eyes of dominant social groups and communities.

Like many scholars of his time, Āzād took for granted the existence of a composite culture without examining the nature of that notion or the foundations upon which it was constructed. Indian history is full of sectarian and communal conflicts, despite the powerful master narrative of a richly composite cultural heritage functionally endowed with a long genealogy. In fact, what came about through intermingling, fusion or synthesis seems to have been neither deliberately created nor consciously appropriated by peoples belonging to different religious traditions.

Finally, the mooted compositeness was never aligned with contending orthodoxies in a way that could be taken as necessarily acceptable when consciously pondered. Therefore, boundaries establishing sharp distinctions between "us" and "them" received primacy, and exclusion became central in the creation of "felt communities." What would truly ensure a genuine and reliably peaceful existence of diverse communities thus remains to be elaborated. "The universe is like an old book of which the beginning and ending pages are missing," said Āzād.[63] Perhaps the reflective and self-critical spirit of his alter ego – the figure of Sarmad, as described by Āzād in his literary interpretation, rather than the historical person – will furnish a useful perspective in our days.

62 One example of this powerful Nehruvian trend is Mujeeb 1967.
63 Quoted in Douglas 1988:243.

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