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# ABUL KALAM AZAD'S IDEA OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM FOR AN INCLUSIVE INDIAN NATIONALISM

## A Civilizational Revisit

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## Abstract

*Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), the first Minister of Education in independent India, was a towering figure in the modern subcontinent. A freedom fighter against British colonial rule following the steps of Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), an Islamic thinker, and a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, Azad was an intellectual-activist advocating an inclusive Indian nationalism. This article focuses on Azad's idea of religious pluralism based on the doctrine of unity of religions (wahdat al-adyan) and how he related it to his vision of an inclusive Indian nationalism. It discusses the main ideas embodied in this vision, especially the interrelated ideas of national unity and integrity, communal solidarity and harmony, cultural cohesion, and the need for a comprehensive education system that would serve national unity and the well-being of all Indians. Azad's idea of unity of religions is articulated in his well-known exegetical work The Tarjuman al-Qur'an, especially in his commentary on the "Opening Chapter" (Surah al-Fatihah) of the Qur'an. This article also shows that Azad emphasized on common religious and cultural values as a means of embracing others for partnership in a national unity movement.*

**Keywords:** (Abul Kalam) Azad, inclusive Indian nationalism, national unity, unity of religions, Hindu-Muslim, national integrity, British-India, freedom of India.

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## Introduction

This article is the third in a series of articles we have devoted to the study of four leading Indian Muslim intellectual-activists, who lived during British colonial rule (1858-1947), regarding their thoughts on Hindu-Muslim relations and Indian national unity. The four figures are Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898),[3] Abul Kalam Ghulam Mohiuddin Azad[4] (1888-1958), Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi (1914-1999). This article focuses on Azad's presiding idea of an inclusive and united India in which light all his political and religious views are to be understood and appreciated. His idea of unity encompasses notions of national unity, unity of religions, unity of humanity, and an inclusive nationalism centred on the one-nation concept. But as our discussion shows, the most fundamental of these notions in shaping his vision of an inclusive and united India is the idea of unity of religions (*wahdat al-adyan*) . In other words, this idea is understood by Azad as the very source of all his other notions of unity. From the political perspective, however, it was his idea of inclusive Indian nationalism that reigned supreme to which his religious and other political beliefs were subordinated.

Azad believed that without national unity India's liberation from British colonial rule would be impossible to achieve. But he also argued that, given India's religious diversity, its national unity could not be realised without religious unity. Viewed from this perspective, his idea of unity of religions became transformed into a theological tool that would serve his larger and ultimate political goal, namely the realization of an inclusive and united India as he has envisioned it. In this article, we will discuss Azad's idea of unity of religions alongside his political idea of an inclusive Indian nationalism and how in his life he sought to harmonize between the two ideas.

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[3] Two articles on Ahmad Khan have been published. See Md Yousuf Ali and Osman Bakar, "Issues of Hindu-Muslim relations in the works of Syed Ahmad Khan," *Al-Shajarah* 25, no. 2 (2020): 315-333; and "Syed Ahmad Khan's Twin Objectives of Educational Reforms in British India: Muslim Advancement and Hindu-Muslim Unity," *Al-Shajarah* 26, no. 1 (2021): 49-70.

[4] Hereafter, he will be cited as Azad.

## Azad's Life and Works

Azad's life and thought have been widely studied.[5] However, these studies mainly pertain to his political thoughts, educational reforms, and activism in the Indian freedom movement.[6] Less studied was his conception of unity of religions to which he interestingly gave a political interpretation. Azad was born in Dhu'l-hijjah 1305/August 1888 in Mecca. He came from a lineage of learned Muslim scholars noted for their distinguished religious standings.[7] His ancestors had intellectual and spiritual links to Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi (d. 1762), and Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 1824).[8] Having an Arab mother, the daughter of a mufti of Medina, and a Sufi (*pir-'alim*) father, Khairuddin Dihlawi (d. 1908), Azad received his early education at home to escape the influence of Western education. Under his father's supervision, Azad completed at the age of fifteen the *dars-i Nizami* course of higher Islamic studies.[9] But his *taqlid*-based learning experience with his father made him critical of this traditional approach to the study of Islam.

He seemed to have been endowed with a critical mind that was ever keen in search of a rational approach to religion. He confessed

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[5] The first substantial biography of Azad in English is Ian Henderson Douglas' *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography*, eds., Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll (New Delhi, 1988); (Oxford University Press, 1993). Other important references to Azad's life and works include Humayun Kabir, ed., *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: A Memorial Volume* (Bombay, 1959); Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, ed., *India's Maulana: Abul Kalam Azad* (New Delhi, 1990), 2 vols.; V. N. Datta, *Maulana Azad* (New Delhi, 1990), and Arsh Masiani, *Abul Kalam Azad* (New Delhi: Publications Divisions, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1976); and S. R. Sharma, *Life and Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad* (Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2005). Christian Troll published a concise account of Azad's life and thought in John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 1, 164-166. According to Troll (p. 166), Humayun Kabir's book is "the most important collection of views and analyses of Azad's personality and work by contemporaries."

[6] See Maulana Abul Kalam Azad *India Wins Freedom* (Namaskar Books, 2021). This book records Azad's autobiographical narrative of his role in and contributions to the independence movement leading to India's partition.

[7] A. Malsiani, *Abul Kalam Azad*.

[8] Christian Troll, "Azad, Abu Al-Kalam," 164.

[9] A. K. Azad, *India Wins Freedom* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988).

this much in *al-Hilal* (The Crescent), one of two weekly Urdu journals[10] which he edited: "I am a born Muslim, but I was not content with the religion I inherited by birth from my ancestors. I cast it away as soon as I was mentally mature enough to discard what I did not want and tried to search out my own way impartially and with an open mind… at last I found what I wanted, and this is now where I found myself. Undoubtedly, this is Islam but not Islam that was made up of customs…and that I inherited from my Muslim family. I am not a Muslim because I ought to follow the path of parents, but I am a Muslim because I discovered it through my own efforts and research. The credence, conviction, and peace of mind I was after, now I have found for myself"[11].

Azad's dissatisfaction with the religious knowledge that he inherited from his family led him to studying the writings of Ahmad Khan, who died when Azad was ten years old. Early in life, Azad was greatly influenced by Ahmad Khan's new rationalism in his approach to Islamic thought.[12] However, his independent thinking and open mind led him to a period of "doubt, unbelief, and sensuous living."[13] Apparently, it was also the period when he was inspired to immerse himself in the teachings of other religions, especially Hinduism, in search of the truth. But by the end of 1909 when he was twenty-one years old, he returned to his Islamic faith.

Around the same time Azad was politically influenced by the revolutionary ideas of young Muslim leaders in Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey such as Muhammad Abduh, Saeed Pasha, and other revolutionary activists whom he met during his visits to those countries.[14] Azad struck a rapport with these leaders because during that time, they were also struggling for liberating their homelands from imperialist aggressions and injustice. After his return from the Arab countries, he realized that there was no alternative means to the

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[10] The other journal was *Al-Balagh*.

[11] Ravindra Kumar, *The Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1992), 67.

[12] A. R. Malihabadi, *Azad Ki Kahani Khud Azad ki Zabuni* (New Delhi, 1958), 231, 360.

[13] Christian Troll, "Azad, Abu Al-Kalam," 164.

[14] Tara Chand, *History of Freedom Movement in India* (New Delhi: Publications Divisions, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1965), vol. 3.

liberation of India from imperialist rule except through the unity of the Indian people.

To achieve this mission of national unity, Azad embarked on journalism as a career, strongly believing that he could best influence and shape public opinion to empower nationalism through this medium. On 13 July 1912, he published and edited the earlier cited weekly journal, *al-Hilal*. Of superior quality to other periodicals in its intellectual content, *al-Hilal* became widely influential. The main purpose of this periodical was to awaken the Muslims and all Indians in general from their political slumber and bridge the gap between Muslims and Hindus in terms of ideas and beliefs. His powerful writings harping on the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity and the slogan 'Free India' swept over the country and inspired the hearts and minds of young as well as older generations alike and drew the attention of Gandhi, Nehru, and other leaders of India. Through *al-Hilal*, a new political consciousness was born that created a revolutionary sentiment among the masses against the British Raj[15]. In two years, the publication of the journal reached a circulation of 26,000 copies a week[16].

However, in 1914, the colonial government banned *al-Hilal* to stop its propagation against its policies by imposing the Press Act. To continue propagating Indian nationalism and his revolutionary ideas for India's freedom he published and edited *al-Balagh* in the same year. But this journal suffered the same fate when the government banned it under the Defence of India Regulations Act. On the 3rd of March 1916 the Government of Bengal issued an order for Azad's immediate externment from Bengal to Ranchi in Bihar.[17] He left

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[15] Justice K. M. Yusuf, *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad*, 2014; and Mahavir Singh, ed., *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: A Profile of a Nationalist* (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers and Distributers Pvt).

[16] Abdullah, "Contribution of *al-Hilal* in India's Independence Movement, Mass Communication," *International Journal of Scientific Research* 3, no. 8 (2014): 231.

[17] He left Calcutta on the same date. See Azad's autobiography in his Preface to the First Edition of his *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* in Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an: The Opening Chapter of the Qur'an*, ed. and translation, Syed Abdul Latif (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1991), first publication in 1962 under the title *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an, Volume One*.

Calcutta for Ranchi where he was arrested and only released after the first World War in 1920[18].

Azad's idea of nationalism was supported wholeheartedly by Indians of all religious communities, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, who shared similar social, economic, and political aspirations and common interests. Azad's mission was to recognise the identity of each community as Indians and to persuade all groups to fight together against the British rule[19]. His top priority was to change Muslim political behaviour towards the adoption of a common struggle with Hindus to remove foreign power from India[20].

Rather noteworthy, Azad was externed just a few months after his announcement in *al-Balagh* that he would "prepare and publish an explanatory Urdu translation of the Qur'an, styled *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, and a commentary of it called *Tafsir al-Bayan*."[21] This monumental project was originally conceived by Azad in 1915. According to him, the project has three objectives: "One was to prepare a translation of the Qur'an, the second was to write a Commentary thereon, and the third was to contribute a prolegomena to the Commentary."[22] Each work was meant for three different audiences, the translation for the average reader, the Commentary for those pursuing a detailed study of the Qur'an, and the Prolegomena for the advanced scholar.[23] The commentary work was entitled *Tafsir al-Bayan* and the prolegomena part entitled *Muqaddima*.[24] By the time he made the *Al-Balagh* announcement of the project "five parts of the Qur'an had already been translated, and the Commentary had covered the matter of the Qur'an up to the *Al-ʻImran* or Chapter 3 of the Qur'an, and the Prolegomena had been set in the form of

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[18] A. K Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, 9. See also *al-Hilal,* vol. 1, no. 1 (1912), 1.

[19] Ahmad Dar Muzaffar, "Role of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in Hindu-Muslim Unity during Freedom Struggle," *International Journal of Innovative Knowledge Concepts* 2, issue 4 (April 2016): 1.

[20] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (Asia Publishing House, 1961), 4.

[21] Mawlana A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xxv.

[22] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an,* xxv.

[23] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xxv-xxvi.

[24] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, Preface to the translation, xvi.

notes." [25] But the frequent political harassment by the British colonial authorities to which Azad was subjected, which he called a series of "ordeals," had kept the project in abeyance for nearly fifteen years. He completed the translation of the entire Qur'an into Urdu at the end of 1918, an exceptionally remarkable achievement at the young age of thirty.

However, for Azad, the achievement was not yet to be celebrated. Sad to say, parts of the manuscripts of the translation were then not in his possession, which meant further delay in its publication. These were in the hands of Sir Charles Cleveland (1866-1929), head of the British Secret Service in India during the First World War. According to Azad, Cleveland was the person in charge of the Intelligence Department of the Government of India who "took an inordinate personal interest"[26] in the issue of his Quranic translation manuscripts. As Azad narrated it in his preface to the first edition of *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, Cleveland took away from Azad's residence in Ranchi "not only the manuscripts of the translation and the Commentary which had been returned by the local Government, but the manuscripts also of every other of my writings and indeed every scrap of printed matter that lay about me."[27] The translation manuscripts were earlier seized in Calcutta when the order of internment was served on Azad but were returned to him several weeks later. Cleveland felt that the local government was hasty in its decision to return the manuscripts to Azad. He reversed this decision and reseized the manuscripts. Azad appealed several times to the Government of India for the return of his manuscripts only to receive a negative reply. This forced him to re-translate the part of the Qur'an with the lost translation. He told us that "it was an ordeal" for him "to write over again what had already been written and lost."[28]

Although Azad completed the translation of the whole Qur'an, he was not able to see its whole publication during his lifetime. According to Dr Syed Abdul Latif, the translator into English (from Urdu) of Azad's *Tarjuman Al-Qur'an* as well as the editor of the

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[25] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an,* xxvi.

[26] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xxvii.

[27] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xxvii.

[28] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xxvii.

translation, two of the three planned volumes of the translation and commentary project were published in his lifetime.[29] But the third and the last volume in the series could not be issued in his lifetime. Azad has other literary works to his credit, including his political biography entitled *India Wins Freedom*, which was translated from Urdu into English. This is a useful volume on Azad's significant contribution to the national movement for the liberation of India from British rule. But *The Tarjuman Al-Qur'an* clearly stands out as his magnum opus. In the words of Syed A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, xv Abdul Latif, "Of his major works, *The Tarjuman Al-Qur'an* is regarded on all hands as his main contribution to Islamic learning."[30]

## Azad's Inclusive Indian Nationalism

The concept of Indian nationalism was developed by Hindu and Muslim leaders during the freedom movement against British rule beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its main purpose was to increase the strength, liberty, and prosperity of the Indian people, irrespective of religion, race, caste, or creed.[31] It was articulated by many Indian intellectuals and political activists. Azad was one of the most prominent among them. He himself was inspired and influenced by India's national figures like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ghandi, Tagore, and Jinnah. Azad's concept of Indian nationalism was neither Hindu nor Islamic, but a synthesis of the two cultures.[32] In short, it was inclusive. Moreover, he emphasised that his nationalism was liberal, rational, and characterised by religious sagacity. These societal traits are important to the realisation of Hindu-Muslim unity and the establishment of a single Indian nationality.

Many factors contributed to Azad's formative thought on nationalism, particularly in the Indian context. These factors include

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[29] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an,* xv.

[30] A. K. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an,* xv.

[31] S. R. Ghosh, *Muslims in Indian Democracy* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House Punjabi Bagh, New Delhi, 1984), 173.

[32] Meraj Ahmad, "Maulana Azad's vision of modern India," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 4, no. 2 (March 2018): 108-109.

the rise and impact of European nationalism in the nineteenth century motivated by various political considerations; the emergence of various revolutionary movements in Islamic countries such as the Young Turks Movement (1889-1918), the victory of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Chinese Revolution of 1911, the rise of Sinn Fein movement in Ireland founded in October 1902, and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. These factors inspired him to start the Indian nationalism.[33] The success of Western countries in building a modern nation-state through the notion of citizenship and territoriality had significant influence on his thought.[34] His great dismay at the negative pervasive impact of colonial rule on the Indian people forced him to develop the ideals of Indian nationalism and preserve the Indian identity.[35] Commenting on Azad's progressive engagement with Indian nationalism, Boyd Shafer reminds us that men do not become nationalists because of biological reasons, but rather they acquire national consciousness by which they become national patriots because of the political, economic, and social discriminated conditions created by British policies, which forced Indians to become nationalists.[36]

To build a united nation, Azad argued there was an urgent need to liberate the mindset of people in India from religious sectarianism and narrow-mindedness towards the unity of religions and unity of humanity. Azad's progressive thought on nationalism won high praise from Gandhi. "I have had the privilege of being associated with Maulana Azad in national work since 1920….," said Gandhi, and "his nationalism is as robust as his faith in Islam, that is why today he is the supreme head of the Indian Congress, and every Indian student should not forget it."[37] For him Islam and nationalism do not contradict each other. He saw 'nationalism' as of two types:

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[33] Parasad Brendra, *Indian Nationalism and Asia* (B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1979), 5-6.

[34] K. K. Gangadharan, ed., *Indian National Consciousness: Growth and Development* (New Delhi: D. R. Goyal for Kalamkar Prakashan), 1972), 146.

[35] R. Suntharalingam, *Indian Nationalism*: *A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 43.

[36] R. Suntharalingam, *Indian Nationalism*, 43.

[37] A. K. Azad, *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Tributes Writings, and Speeches* (Patna: Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, 2002), 15.

one is exclusive and aggressive, which is rejected by religions, and the other is inclusive, moderate, and humane, which is easily harmonised with and integrated into one's religious beliefs, traditional values, and socio-cultural sentiments that have been shaped by multi-religious and multi-cultural living.[38] Although there is great diversity in India in terms of languages, cultures, and religions, Azad believes that an inclusive Indian nationalism is possible. He argued that the diversity in question would not prevent the Indian people from being united for the cause of the independence from British rule.[39] His conviction was that a loyal nationalist ardently loves his/her country and would readily work together with other fellow countrymen in enhancing a common culture and common values through a common nationalism and would sacrifice his/her life and wealth for the sake of the nation.

In *al-Hilal Thani*, Azad defines 'nationalism' as "a collective consciousness of man and a notion of social order in a country by which people developed their relations, collective feelings and undertake their collective responsibilities in a territory and state."[40] He argues that innumerable realities of a common life and social association in Indian society for over one thousand years had amalgamated into a united nationalism[41].

Azad did not see Islam as an obstacle to the agenda of bringing all Indians under the banner of national movement. On the contrary, he saw Islam as a source of empowerment of Indian nationalism. In a lecture he delivered at the Indian National Congress in 1940 he emphasised: "My sources of inspiration as a Muslim are Islamic traditions built over more than thirteen hundred years. My real property is the history, education, art, culture and civilization and heritage of Islam. It is my duty to save every command of Islam and I do not want any type of interference in it. But with all these sentiments, I have one more sentiment, which is the product of the reality of my life. Islamic spirit would not come in its way. It directs

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[38] Zakir Hussain, *Abul Kalam Azad between Dreams and Realities* (Prakash Book Depot, 1990), 128-129.

[39] Ravindra Kumar, The Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, 2.

[40] A. K. Azad, "Islam and Nationalism," *Al-Hilal Thani*, June-December 2007.

[41] A. K. Azad, *Indian Wins Freedom*, 27.

me to love my country with a feeling. I feel proud I am Indian. I am a part of indivisible India, and this is "Indian nationalism."[42]

Azad also reminded Indian Muslims that it is their obligatory religious duty to join hands with Hindus to fight against the imperialists. He himself, he said, was religiously inspired to fight against the aggressors to free India by the following verses of the Qur'an: "You are the best people ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin the good (*al-ma'ruf*) and forbid the evil (*al-munkar*).[43] And "Let their arise out of you a group of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones who are successful."[44]

Azad saw these verses as justifying Indian nationalism whereby Muslims would spearhead a national movement with other communities for the establishment of equality and justice. Azad's approach to his united nationalism was empowerment of Muslim belief in their own religion and their cultural cohesion with other religious communities and cultural groups. To Azad, the joint wealth of India is not material but spiritual and moral. It is the heritage of the common nationality of its people by which they have been moulded into a united and indivisible nation. He drew parallels between India and the state of Medina established by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, which signed a treaty with the diverse communities of Arabia based on commitment to peace and harmony and friendliness for the common cause of humanity. Under this agreement, every citizen is responsible to defend the country, if it is attacked by the enemy from outside. In Medina under the Prophet's leadership the Jews and Christians were given freedom of religion as well freedom of speech, which signified a united nationalism unheard of in its time. Likewise, Muslims living in India should make a treaty with the followers of other religions in India in the spirit of the Medina covenant: "I hereby promise to make complete peace with the tribes dwelling in the neighbourhood of Medina and express full agreement with the stipulations set down by them. We, the

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[42] Meraj Ahmad, "Mawlana Azad's vision of modern India," 109.

[43] *The Qur'an*, 3:110.

[44] *The Qur'an*, 3:104-105.

signatories of the aforesaid of a single band, group, or community."[45]

Azad recalled history and made the following emphasis: "Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievements…which are joint endeavour. The country did not belong to a community, but it belongs to all and one. I am indispensable to this noble edifice and without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete."[46]

However, Azad expressed his conviction that as a Muslim this is his sacred responsibility to convey the true teachings of Islam towards all people as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his companions. Azad's concept of nationalism was based on the teachings of Islam; it was aimed at countering the aggression of colonialism and to free people of India to establish peace and harmony for all Indians. In 1921 at the Khilafat conference at Agra, he said: "The need of the hour is that the seven crore Muslims are living in India, should establish such close ties and develop such fellow feeling with the twenty-two crore Hindus, that they may henceforth be reckoned as one single nation and country as inseparable parts of one combined and indivisible whole."[47]

## Indian nationalism: Issue of national unity (*Muttahida Qaumiyat*)

Azad's idea of national unity is conveyed by the Arabic-Urdu term *muttahida qaumiyat*, which literally means 'national unity.' Central to the realisation of this idea is the existence of Hindu-Muslim unity. Not surprisingly, Azad worked hard to bridge the widening gap between these two rival religious groups by developing more sympathetic relations between them. For Azad, the concept of national unity is an application of the principle of *Tawhid* (Divine Unity) to the socio-political domain. The intellectual instrument of this application is rationalism. The principle of *Tawhid* at both theoretical and practical levels embraced all religions and communities in a country where diversity of language and culture

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[45] Zia al-Hasan Farooqi, *Maulana Azad Towards Freedom* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Company, 1997), 129.

[46] P. N. Chapra, *Maulana Abul Kalam's Unfulfilled Dreams* (New Delhi: Inprint, 1990), 149.

[47] Ravindra Kumar, *The Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,* 18.

exists like in India. National unity, he believed, is the only way to liberate India from imperialist and colonialist rule. In 1923, at the Indian National Congress meeting in Delhi, he enunciated and articulated his broad-based humanitarian nationalism for the betterment of Indian community by which a common culture, customs, and common interest can be developed within a plural religious society.[48] Earlier in 1920, in his Presidential address at the Congress, he described: "Our language, our poetry, literature, society, our tastes, our dresses, our traditions and the innumerable realities of our daily life abide the passion of a common life and an integrated society... our social association for over one thousand years has amalgamated into a united nationalism."[49]

Azad believed that through national unity, a true Indian identity and independence can be attained. He reminded Indian Muslims that the British would allow them to pray as a religious duty, but they would not allow them to uphold the temporal power of the people's vicegerency (*Khalifat*).[50] Azad also held the view that national unity would eventually lead to the abolishment of the idea of majority or minority in the national consciousness because "mutual confidence and mutual faith with the feeling of emboldened truth can guarantee for our hopeful future."[51] He made clear to the Indian people that criticizing one another or blaming the past is not what is now needed by them, but today's need is "national unity or Indian nationalism" for the sake of Indian independence.[52] Azad's advisory words proved to be true. The concept of nationalism did contribute significantly to national unity within the context of Indian social, political, economic, and religious perspectives.[53]

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[48] Ravindra Kumar, *The Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,* 2.

[49] A. K. Azad, Indian Wins Freedom, 27.

[50] Gail Minault, *The Khalifat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press and Oxford University Press, 1982), 93-95.

[51] Ravindra Kumar, *Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,* 4.

[52] Ravindra Kumar, *Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,* 4.

[53] Ravindra Kumar, *Life and Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad* (Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Mehra Offset Press, 1991), 4.

### Indian nationalism: The role of arts and cultural cohesion

Azad cultivated Indic arts and culture throughout his life. He considered himself first and foremost an Indian nationalist with the conviction that national identity ought to be above and over religious and regional identities. Thus, in his Presidential address in 1940, he stated unequivocally: "Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happening of our daily life, everything bears the sign of our joint endeavor….our languages were different but we grew to use a common language, our manners and customs were dissimilar but they acted and reacted on each other, and thus produced a new synthesis. This joint wealth is the heritage of our common nationality…these thousand years of our joint life have mingled us into a common nationality."[54]

Azad believed that arts and culture had the power to bind together not only hearts and souls but also entire societies and nations. These bindings would preserve "our heritage, identity, and history, and develop a sense of unity to work together shoulder to shoulder and reflect our emotion through our attitudes and conducts." [55] Azad's attempt was to create more sympathetic relations between Hindus and Muslims. Institutionalization of the arts and culture into the Indian educational system was one of his initiatives. In this spirit he founded such organisations as "Sangeet Natok Academy," "Sahitya Academy," "Lalit Kala Academy," and Indian Council for Cultural Relations between Hindu and Muslim Communities.[56]

### Indian Nationalism: Communal harmony and solidarity

Azad strongly felt that communal harmony and solidarity was a pre-condition for India's freedom. He realized that religions could play an important role to alleviate communal harmony. Accordingly,

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[54] Abul Kalam Azad, *Presidential Address to the Indian National Congress in 1940* delivered at the fifty-third session of the Indian National Congress held at Ramgarh, March 19-20, 1940.
[55] Abul Kalam Azad, Presidential Address in 1940.
[56] Meraj Ahmad, "Maulana Azad's vision of modern India," 112.

he respected all religions and paid tribute to them as a mark of admiration for them and their followers. He envisioned a country of communal harmony and solidarity where all religionists will follow their respective religious obligations. He argued that if the inhabitants of India professed Hinduism for thousands of years, Islam too is the religion of many Indians for a thousand years.[57] Likewise, if a Hindu declares proudly that he/she is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so we can say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam. I have expressed often and widely that Indian Christians too have a right to say with pride that they are Indians and follow Christianity.[58]

Azad argued that only religion can protect cultural identity and nationalism based on religious orthodoxy. And it is only by virtue of the common bond existing between religions and the people's broadmindedness that India could get rid of the colonial power to establish an independent nationhood and to preserve its historic traditions of catholicity and co-existence. Azad used his vast Islamic knowledge to persuade the Indian Muslims to join the national struggle against British imperialist rule. He told them that it is the teaching of Islam itself to encourage its followers to strive for human brotherhood, communal harmony, and cultural cohesion. Many Indian Muslims were, in fact, persuaded by his religious conviction.

The evidence of Azad's commitment to a united India could be seen in his strong opposition to the partition of the subcontinent proposed by the Muslim League (founded in 1906). He tirelessly advocated for a single India that would embrace both Hindus and Muslims while strongly opposing the partition of British India into independent India and Pakistan.[59] For shaping the Indian culture and communal harmony, Azad believed there was no other alternative except through unity and universal brotherhood of its people. On 15th December 1923, in his presidential address again to the Indian National Congress, he declared unequivocally that Muslims should

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[57] P. N. Chapra, "Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's Unfulfilled Dream," 149.

[58] P. N. Chapra, "Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's Unfulfilled Dream," 149. See also A. K. Azad, Presidential Address in 1940.

[59] On Azad's own account of his opposition to British India's participation, see A. K. Azad, *India Wins Freedom*. See also K. Sarwar Hasan, "Abul Kalam Azad on Partition: A Review Article," *Pakistan Horizon* 13, no. 4 (1960): 318-323.

join the Congress for the freedom of India because to him the country does not belong to any single community but to all and one. His conviction on communal harmony was that every Muslim or every Hindu is a member of the Indian nation and by religious dogma, one cannot separate himself/herself from the larger Indian society. For being an independent nation, unity between Hindus and Muslims was deemed more important than even the freedom of the country.[60] He warned that any delay in the attainment of *Swaraj* (Independence and self-government) would be a great loss to India but if India's unity is lost, it would be a loss for the entire mankind.[61]

## *Indian nationalism: The Khilafat movement for national integrity*

Taking over the responsibility of Khilafat Movement (KM) (1919-1924) by Azad was another pragmatic approach of his to motivate Hindus and Muslims to join the freedom movement, which originally aimed to safeguard the Ottoman Empire from 1919 until 1924. His participation in KM was to unite all Indians to free India from colonial rule in solidarity with the leaders of the Islamic countries who were also fighting to liberate their countries from the imperialist aggression. As a leader of KM Azad got disillusioned with the British and became anti-imperialistic with the slogan, "Hindu-Musalmans ke Jai."[62] This movement, which was supported by Gandhi, had the potential of uniting Hindus and Muslims in India. In expressing his support for KM, Gandhi commented that "if the British fight, they can fight only united Hindus and Muslims."[63] For the formation of national union, Azad advised Muslims to cooperate with KM. Rhetorically, he raised a question: Is there any obstacle for Muslims to make a covenant with a nation which had not committed aggression against them and not occupied their lands?[64]

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[60] Kumar, Ravindra. *The Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,* 57.

[61] Sayed Shahabuddin, ed., *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: Selected Speeches and Writings* (New Delhi: Hope India Publication, 2007), 42.

[62] The slogan means "Victory of Muslims and Hindus."

[63] Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Islam and Indian Nationalism: Reflections on Abul Kalam Azad* (Manohar publication, published by Ajay Kumar Jain, 1992), 109-110.

[64] A. K. Azad, *Khutbaat-e-Abul Kalam Azad* (Lahore: Islamic Publishing House), new edition, 45. See Mushirula Hasan, ed., *Islam and Indian Nationalism*, 24.

Azad encouraged the Muslim community to join KM to establish peace and harmony, justice, and equality for all. They should emulate the first Muslims in Medina, he argued, who made an agreement to do so for Muslims and others. He reminded Muslims that it is their duty to uphold and defend the Khilafat institution from the common enemies of Muslims and non-Muslims in India by means of Jihad.[65] In adopting this position Azad was no doubt influenced by the Pan-Islamism movement by which he became familiar to Indians and closer to Gandhi with his philosophy. Both Azad and Gandhi shared a deep passion for religion. Azad emulated the Prophet Muhammad's life by living simply, rejecting material possessions and pleasures. He played a key role in the mobilization of people in India to join KM. Under Azad and Gandhi, the Non-Cooperation Movement and Khalifat Movement adopted a unified plan of action of non-violence and non-cooperation.

The Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Gandhi on 4 September 1920 was a turning point in Azad's role in the national movement. Through this movement, he was able to motivate more Muslims to join the Indian National Congress to fight together with Hindus against the British rule. It was a good opportunity for him to be closer to both communities to convey the message of his Indian nationalism. Azad wholeheartedly supported the Non-Cooperation movement. He advocated its necessity and principles. In this process, he became the frontier fighter in the eyes of Gandhi. His focal point in the process of the movement was Hindu-Muslim unity and thanks to his charismatic leadership he managed to unite both communities against British colonial rule for India's liberation.

Azad's idea of Khilafat is not to be confused with the caliphate system of rule in Islamic history. He was referring to a new political institution for modern India that appeared to be a combination of elements from the traditional Islamic caliphate and elements from modern Western democracy. By 'Khilafat' Azad means 'political institution' and by 'Khalifah' he means 'representative.' The functions of a Khalifah are to shape a nation's free will, unity,

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[65] Abul Kalam Azad, *Masala-i-Khilafat wa Jazeera al-Arab* (Calcutta, Al-Balagh Press, 1920). See its English translation by Mirza Abdul Qadir Beg, *Khilafat and Jazeera al-Arab* (Bombay: Central Khalifat Committee, 1920), 23.

suffrage, and election for the well-being of humanity. Khalifah as the head of the state must be elected by the choice of the people. He should not claim a special privilege, consider the treasury as the property of the people, be responsible for the establishment of the parliamentary government, and practice consultation in all administrative and legal matters for the betterment of the country and people. His political vision was a democratic, united, and prosperous India, which provides equal opportunities for all citizens and eliminates all discriminations and barriers based on birth, caste, tribe, and wealth from India. Azad held a moderate political view after joining Khilafat and Gandhi's Satyagraha movements for the formation of the National Union. His political approach was non-violence as a strategy during India's freedom struggle.

In *al-Hilal*, he published his ideas on political authority (*'imarat*) based on three principles inspired by the Qur'an and Sunnah. These are the fundamental principles of collective life. In his conception, *'imarat* is understood as political authority and state power pure and simple, which are a part of the universal khilafat of Islam. In India where Muslims are a minority to him, they should maintain their relations with the country's government under a collective agreement. The purpose of the three principles of *'imarat* elaborated by Azad was to establish a collective life for minority Muslims in India. The three principles as applied to the Muslim community are: Agreeing unanimously by all citizens on a learned and enterprising Muslim to make him their Imam, accepting truly and sincerely all his teachings and obeying unquestioningly all his directives based on the Qur'an and Sunnah.[66]

He argued that the political approach of Muslims in India as a minority should be moderate. Azad viewed that if Muslims as a minority worked as one organized mass with a separate leader of their own, not individually, then they would secure effectively more parliamentary seats for the community.[67] This is how Azad envisioned a truly Islamic collective life for Indian Muslims. Azad argued that if the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ could unite with the Jews of Medina against the Quraish with the aim of forming 'One National

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[66] Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Islam and Indian Nationalism*, 109-110.
[67] Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Islam and Indian Nationalism*, 110.

Polity', then, there is nothing wrong for Indian Muslims to unite with Hindus for the formation of national unity. He argued that there is no obstacle for Muslims to make a covenant with a nation, which had not committed aggression against them. In fact, they must stand up against aggressors who occupied their land. Doing 'jihad' (struggle) for defending the land and its people from aggression for Muslims is an obligatory religious duty. He further argued that if religion is being threatened by the enemy, Muslims are obliged to protect the people of the country as ordained by Allah.[68] It is worth noting that with the support of Gandhi and Azad, KM was able to reach out to all the sections of Muslim society and organized them as a force which shook the foundation of British rule in India.

## Indian nationalism: Education for well-being of all Indians

As a nationalist, Azad emphasized on the development of a comprehensive education system that befitted India as a multicultural and multireligious society. As the first Education Minister of independent India, he initiated reforms and democratization of the country's education system with the view of abolishing the dominating structures of hegemonic hierarchy of caste and class. These existing structures perpetuated separatism and sectarian nationalism that divided the nation and prevented its progress. Azad promoted all over India the Gandhian notion of education, which was a proper education meant for every citizen of India. Azad believed that for independent India, a proper and effective policy of education is more important than its industrial policy.

Azad's educational policy was based on two fundamental principles: one is the unity of India, and the other is beneficial education for all. He argued that any type of progress is possible for a nation, if the country is politically, economically, socially, and culturally united and stable. However, to establish a common educational system for all in a united India, Azad had to face many challenges during the period when he served as Education Minister.

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[68] A. K. Azad, *Khilafat and Jazirah al-Arab*, Mirza Abdul Qadir Beg, English trans., 23.

His main challenge was how to implement a universal and beneficial education system for post-colonial India.

## The unity of religions (*wahdat al-adyan*)

Azad's argument for embracing the doctrine of the unity of religions was both theological and political. Both arguments are found in his commentary on the Opening Chapter (*Surah al-Fatihah*). In other words, Azad's advocacy of the idea of unity of religions is to be understood both in the political and theological sense. Theologically, the doctrine of unity of religions is supreme in which the idea of national unity and inclusive nationalism is only to be viewed as its application to the political domain. Politically, however, the doctrine of unity of religions is treated as just one among several instruments to help contribute to the empowerment of India's inclusive nationalism.

Given India's glaring religious diversity, so Azad argued, its national unity cannot be achieved without religious unity. Azad approached the problem of religious diversity that is characteristic of India from the perspective of religious unity, which he inferred from the content of *Surah al-Fatihah*. Thus, the societal and national context of his advocacy of unity of religions was Indian religious pluralism by which is meant the existence of many religions in India. Politically, he argued that the unity of religions means the unity and the empowerment of their followers and of the whole nation for two main purposes. First, India's liberation and freedom from colonial rule; Second, India's national reconstruction to attain progress in politics, economy, and other sectors of societal life.[69] Azad's deep conviction about the unity of religions is clearly reflected in his literary works.[70] He saw the unity of religions in the political sense as the most powerful enabling factor for a united India. That is why, he appealed acquiescently to the followers of all religions to return to the true form of their respective religions by which they could forge a united India for its liberation from imperialist rule. This appeal is

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[69] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur`an*, ed., A. Latif (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965), vol. 1, 184-185.

[70] A. K. Azad, *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: His Passion for Freedom and Communal Harmony,* 2011, 16-30.

rather significant since it has a bearing on his conception of the theological unity of religions.

Azad was fully aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of authentic understanding of unity of religions. In his exegesis of *Surah al-Fatihah* he discusses some of these obstacles. He describes one of the major obstacles as follows: "The claim of every religious group was not that it alone was the bearer of truth, but that the religion of every other group was false. The natural result of such an attitude was hatred of others and mutual warfare and bloodshed in the name of God."[71] But Azad argued that the claim is false, since the criterion of truth used by the claimant in judging between religions is based on differences in their external forms, which are naturally bound to be so. Azad refers to formal differences between religions in "the character of the ceremonial and of the customs and manners which the followers of a religion observed, such as the form of worship, the ceremonial attendant on sacrifices, the type of food permitted or prohibited, and the outside mode of dress and manner of living."[72] For Azad, the unity of religions is to be found in their inner dimensions, and not in their external forms.

According to Azad, the Qur'an presents a universal theory of the unity of religions in the sense that "it re-presents to the world at large the universal truth sponsored by every religion."[73] As he understood it, the unity of religions is essentially the unity of the universal truths contained in them. Interestingly, Azad discussed the theory in his commentary on the last three verses of *Surah al-Fatihah*. He entitled the commentary "Divine Guidance: *Hidayat*."[74]He outlines in this commentary the main principles of the theory of unity of religions, which he gathered from the Qur'an.[75] These principles include (1) the idea of the same common divine source of all religions and their respective scriptures, and hence implying One Common God for humanity; (2) the idea of a universal

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[71] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 180-181.

[72] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 0.

[73] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 181.

[74] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 147-189.

[75] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 181-189.

spiritual law[76] governing the human order just as there is a universal biophysical law governing the natural order; (3) the unity of mankind;[77] (4) the unity of the Qur'an in its account of all divine messages that came before it: the Qur'an proclaimed the truth of all revealed religions; and (5) the idea of one straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*) for all religions; Azad understands this straight path as "the universal religion (*din*) or the way of God that the Qur'an speaks of."[78]

In subscribing to a Qur'an-based theory of unity of religions, Azad was thus advocating a concept of religious pluralism that is in conformity with Islam. He was interested in its application to his pursuit of an inclusive Indian nationalism. He was convinced that it would empower Indian nationalism. The unity of religions signifies to him the idea of living together as one nation with peace, religious co-existence and non-violence, cultural cohesion, and having dialogue to overcome differences between groups and communities.

Azad was aware that people are divided among themselves into many sects or groups in the names of race, caste, tribes, customs, nation, community, religion, and culture. As a result, people are isolated from each other. But the main purpose of religion to him is not to brand divisions among people but to worship the One God who is the Creator of all things, to function as His vicegerents of God, and to fulfil the trust assigned by Him.

## Concluding Remarks

Azad's struggle in the Indian national movement for an independent India was a success. But his sacrifices for the freedom of the people of India as a united country failed to prevent the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines. He constantly appeals to both communities to live together like brothers and sisters and work collaboratively for the common good as one people. The goals he set for his community, society, and people and the approaches and strategies he adopted in the pursuit of these goals are still relevant and meaningful to the contemporary world. They are indeed

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[76] *The Qur'an*, 49:13.

[77] *The Qur'an*, 10:19.

[78] A. K. Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 185.

particularly relevant to the Muslim communities, be they a majority or a minority in their respective countries.

The national issues Azad addressed for the betterment of the entire community, the religious doctrines he reformed, and the multicultural approaches to national unity that he adopted, as discussed in this article, have become even more important for our time. In contemporary India, Hindu-Muslim relations are at their worst level, certainly far below the prevailing level during the time of Abul Kalam Azad. For multicultural nations that are still struggling to achieve national unity and inter-religious harmony, there are still useful lessons that may be learnt from Azad's life and thought.

# TRANSLITERATION TABLE

## CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

| | Ar | Pr | OT | UR | | Ar | Pr | OT | UR | | Ar | Pr | OT | UR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ء | ' | ' | ' | ' | ز | z | z | z | z | گ | — | g | g | g |
| ب | b | b | b | b | ڑ | — | — | — | ṛ | ل | l | l | l | l |
| پ | — | p | p | p | ژ | — | zh | j | zh | م | m | m | m | m |
| ت | t | t | t | t | س | s | s | s | s | ن | n | n | n | n |
| ٹ | — | — | — | ṭ | ش | sh | sh | ş | sh | ه | h | h | h¹ | h¹ |
| ث | th | th | th | th | ص | ṣ | ṣ | ṣ | ṣ | و | w | v/u | v | v/u |
| ج | j | j | c | j | ض | ḍ | ẓ | ż | ż | ى | y | y | y | y |
| چ | — | ch | çh | ch | ط | ṭ | ṭ | ṭ | ṭ | ة | -ah | | | -a² |
| ح | ḥ | ḥ | ḥ | ḥ | ظ | ẓ | ẓ | ẓ | ẓ | ال | al³ | | | |
| خ | kh | kh | kh | kh | ع | ' | ' | ' | ' | | | | | |
| د | d | d | d | d | غ | gh | gh | ğ | gh | | | | | |
| ڈ | — | — | — | d | ف | f | f | f | f | | | | | |
| ذ | dh | dh | dh | dh | ق | q | q | k | q | | | | | |
| ر | r | r | r | r | ك | k | k/g | k/ñ | k | | | | | |

¹ – when not final
² – at in construct state
³ – (article) al - or 1-

## VOWELS

| | | Arabic and Persian | Urdu | Ottoman Turkish |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Long | ا | ā | ā | ā |
| | آ | Ā | Ā | — |
| | و | ū | ū | ū |
| | ي | ī | ī | ī |
| Doubled | يِّ | iyy (final form ī) | iy (final form ī) | iyy (final form ī) |
| | وّ | uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian) | uv | uvv |
| Diphthongs | و | au or aw | au | ev |
| | ى | ai or ay | ay | ey |
| Short | َ | a | a | a or e |
| | ُ | u | u | u or ü |
| | | | | o or ö |
| | ِ | i | i | i |

## URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جﮭ  jh   گﮭ   gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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# AL-SHAJARAH

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