

**Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar and the Pakistan  
Movement: An Analysis**

Altaf Ullah\*

Prior to the partition the social, economic and political condition of the Indian Muslims was miserable. On the one hand, they were exploited by the British Imperialist policies and on the other, they were encircled by the Hindu *bannias* who left no stone unturned to wash out the concept of separate identity from the minds of the Muslims. The non-Muslim forces especially the Hindu community benefited from the British policies and thus made themselves stronger economically as well as politically. The 1857 War of Independence consequently changed the political scenario of India. The British ascended the Indian throne and the direct British rule was imposed. The East India Company ceased to exist from the day the British Crown took over the political reign of India. The War of Independence had amply manifested the temper and tone of the local people to the new rulers who had though realized that it was no more possible to keep away the natives from the affairs of the country yet they were still reluctant to hand over power to them. It was really the political leaders and reformists of the Muslim community of India who took the responsibility to make the Muslims community politically aware in order not to be exploited by the other communities of the sub-continent. Like the leaders of the other provinces a host of political leaders from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) took active part under the dynamic leadership of Quaid-i-Azam for the achievement of Pakistan. Among those leaders Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar was one who proved himself worthy of the Quaid's

confidence. This research paper deals with the political career of Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar in order to draw a concrete sketch of his political activities both in the pre and post-partition periods.

Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar was born in Peshawar on 13 June 1899 in Mohalla Rampura, Kocha Kakran. His father Abdul Hannan was a prominent figure of the Afghan tribe, Kakar who opposed the British government.<sup>1</sup> He completed his early education in Mission High School and later in Sanatan Dharram High School Peshawar. He completed his B.A. from the University of Punjab and then he was sent to the Aligarh Muslim University from where he got the degree of bachelor in law. The Aligarh Muslim University proved to be the breeding ground for the Indian Muslim political leaders of the All-India Muslim League in the post 1857 War era and also the source of inspiration of the leaders of the League. Besides his studies Nishtar had the opportunities of meeting Maulana Jauhar and other leaders of the Khilafat Movement. Nishtar had been trained and prepared by this great institution of learning to take active part in the freedom struggle for the Muslims.

Nishtar's active political career started from the hectic Khilafat days when he started participating in Khilafat Movement. In 1927, he joined Indian National Congress (INC) and was one of the founding members of the Provincial Congress Committee.<sup>2</sup> Almost the whole region of the NWFP at that time was dominated by the Congress the then leading political organization of India while All-India Muslim League was not so organized and influential. M.A. Jinnah's absence also gave a setback to it as many Muslims joined the Congress due to the lack of sound leadership in the League. The Congress tried to show that it was the only political organization of representing all the people of India. The League in the NWFP was not well-organized due to the local political rivalries and factions among the Provincial League. On the other hand the Congress was influential enough having a strong representative in the person of Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan.

Nishtar was keen observer of matters and always remained a man of practice when he perceived that Congress was serving only the Hindu cause he put his resignation to the Congress. Regarding his resignation from the Congress, he stated, "separation from the

All India National Congress was because of the fact that I had known that Hindus were prejudiced against the Muslims and would never be sincere to them. The success of the Indian National Congress in the freedom movement would mean that the Muslims getting themselves unchained from the British should enslave themselves to the Hindus.”<sup>3</sup>

It was actually the Khilafat Movement that motivated Nishtar to concentrate wholeheartedly on politics. At the outbreak of the Movement, the young Nishtar at the age of twenty started composing verses, which expressed his attachment with Khilafat Movement. The movement for extension of constitutional reforms to the NWFP, *Rangila Rasool* Agitation, movement for induction of elected representatives of the people to the local bodies of NWFP and agitation against Simon Commission added new dimensions to the politics of the NWFP. Nishtar participated in all these movements under the banner of Local Khilafat Committee. In one of the gatherings in Peshawar City, he moved the following resolution.

“This meeting of the citizens of Peshawar strongly protests against the proposed address to be presented to the viceroy on behalf of the Municipal Committee of Peshawar for its omission in full or in part of the aspirations of the Frontier people for the extension of the reforms scheme to NWFP.”<sup>4</sup>

During 1929-38 Nishtar was involved with the local bodies in Peshawar. In the first local bodies elections which were held in November 1929, Nishtar contested the election from Ward No. 5 Peshawar City and returned successful. He served his people as Municipal Commissioner till the end of 1938. The 1935 Government of India Act provided for the first general elections in India. Nishtar contested the election as an independent candidate and elected to the provincial legislature of NWFP. The Quaid sent him a letter when he became member of the assembly.

Dear Mr. Nishtar,

Many thanks for you letter of the 11<sup>th</sup> instant. Yes I know that you have been returned to the assembly. Let me congratulate you for it. I am in Delhi till the 21<sup>st</sup> march and shall be very glad to see you if you happen to be in Delhi.<sup>5</sup>

Nishtar had formally joined the League in 1936 as he wrote the Quaid, “In 1936, I was taken on the council of the League and since then I have been formally connected with it.”<sup>6</sup> On the

invitation of Jinnah, Nishtar participated in the twenty Sixth Annual Session of All India Muslim League, which was held at Patna.

Being an independent candidate in the provincial assembly, Nishtar not only took part in the assembly proceedings but also freely expressed his views on different legislative matters. He was the first one to move the NWFP Repealing and Amending Bill 1937 in the Assembly.

The status of Provincial Muslim League was not remarkable till 1937. Mr. Jinnah though accepted the League defeat in the provincial elections of 1937 yet since then the Muslim League had won every by-election and the Quaid was confident enough that if general elections were held in this province, the League would succeed. The Frontier League was formally affiliated with its central organization (AIML) on 17 April 1938 at Calcutta Session of the League in which Ziauddin moved a resolution urging upon the Muslims of India to take special steps to combat the Congress anti-Muslim activities in the NWFP. That Session was attended by a large number of prominent figures of the province. The Quaid also promised due assistance to be provided to the League in Frontier.<sup>7</sup>

When the Congress Ministry in NWFP resigned on 7 November 1939, it created a favourable situation for the League in NWFP. The then Governor of the province invited Sardar Aurangzeb Khan<sup>8</sup> to form the ministry. Aurangzeb however, was in trouble as he could not command a majority in the assembly.<sup>9</sup> He asked Nishtar (he was then an independent candidate) to join the ministry. But Nishtar was not in favour of forming a ministry with the help of Hindu-Sikh Nationalists. He knew that such a ministry would meet the same fate as that of Sir Qayum. According to Nishtar, "I opposed the idea of forming a Muslim League Ministry because of the unfavourable circumstances like high prices and shortage of food and cloth etc."<sup>10</sup> However, Nishtar was convinced by Aurangzeb to join the ministry. Thus on 23 May 1943 a Muslim League Ministry in NWFP was sworn in with Sardar Aurangzeb Khan as Chief Minister. His cabinet was consisted of Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar, M. Samin Jan, Abdur

Rehman Khan and Sardar Ajit Singh. The portfolio of Finance was handed over to Nishtar.

It was the first Muslim League Ministry in NWFP which started function under the premiership of Aurangzeb Khan. The Muslim League got rid of the Congress rule. The formation of this ministry was regarded as a new ray of hope for the Muslims of India in general and for the Muslims of the NWFP in particular. The Congress blamed the authorities of conspiring against the people of the province by installing the League ministry without popular support. Though the formation of this ministry was an extraordinary achievement in the political career of the Provincial League but it could work only for about two and a half years. The failure of this ministry had already been predicted by Nishtar which proved his deep foresightedness and insight.

In 1944 when the struggle of the League entered into its decisive phase, Nishtar was appointed as member of the AIML Working and Planning Committees.<sup>11</sup> The Quaid himself chosen him to represent the AIML at the Second Simla Conference 1946 and the June 3, 1947 Leader's Conference with Viceroy on partition plan. On 14 October 1946 the Quaid nominated him for the Interim Government in India on behalf of the League. In the interim set up he was given the portfolios Post and Air. Indeed Nishtar constantly remained on various responsible positions throughout his life. He made it clear that Pakistan would be a permanent, independent state with no possibility of future union with India. The myth of United India was ultimately exposed when the political mission of Muslim League reached to its logical consequence in the shape of two separate states i.e. India and Pakistan.

Nishtar did not abandon his political struggle rather he accelerated his activities to serve the nation more. After the creation of Pakistan he served his country first as Minister of Communication in the first cabinet for about two years and then Finance Minister. He remained the first Muslim Governor of Punjab from July 1949 till November 1951. In the cabinet headed by Khwaja Nazimuddin, he was given the portfolio of Industries and remained in office till the dismissal of that cabinet. Thereafter

he did not join the next cabinet and rather accepted the responsibilities of the President of AIML in January 1956.<sup>12</sup>

He strongly opposed the dismissal of Nazimuddin's cabinet and termed this act as unconstitutional and undemocratic. He expressed in his poetical language as "*bas itni khata per rahbari cheeni gayee hum say, kay hum say qafilay manzil pay lutwayay nahi jatay*, (leadership was snatched away from us merely on the ground that we can not abandon the masses at the mercy of dacoits), and *nairangeay siyasat-i-dauran to dekhiyay, manzil unheeh mili jo shareek-i-safar na thay*, (look at the irony of contemporary politics, those who shunned the caravan, have reached the destination)."<sup>13</sup>

During his tenure as president of the Pakistan Muslim League (1956-58) he took the responsibility to infuse a new life in this political organization. He organized, reactivated and transformed it into a live organization and remained its President till his death. He died on 14 February 1958 due to heart failure. Nishtar Medical College in Multan and Nishtar Park in Karachi while Nishtar Hall and Nishtar Abad (a town) in Peshawar are named after him.

---

#### Notes and References

- \* Research Fellow, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Centre of Excellence, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Email: altaf\_qasmi@yahoo.com, Cell # 0345-5046584
- 1 Syed Mujawar Hussain Shah, *Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar: A Political Biography* (Lahore: Qadria Books, 1985), pp.3-4.
- 2 Sharif al Mujahid, "Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar: An Appreciation", *Dawn*, December 30, 2006.
- 3 Syed Wiqar Ali Shah, *Muslim League in NWFP* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1992), p.33.
- 4 Naushad Khan, "Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar" in Parvez Khan Toru and Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat eds. *Celebrities of NWFP*, vol. I & II (Peshawar: Pakistan Study Center, University of Peshawar, 2005), p.151.
- 5 *Ibid*, p.154.
- 6 *Ibid*, p.155.
- 7 Riaz Ahmad, ed., *Papers Presented at the Three Days International Conference on All India Muslim League (1906-1947)*, 18-20 December 2006 (Islamabad) Vol.I Published by National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, 2006, p.176.

- 
- 8 Sardar Mohammad Aurangzeb Khan pertained to a famous Pakhtun tribe “Gandapur” of Dera Ismail Khan. He was born in a *Zamindar* family and got his early education in Karachi and Dera Ismail Khan and then went to Peshawar where he completed his B.A. from Missionary College. He obtained his L.L.B. degree from Aligarh University where he was the President of Muslim Student Union. He started his legal practice at Peshawar and remained in close contact with Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayum Khan. He formed the first Muslim League Ministry in NWFP during 1943-45.
  - 9 Riaz Ahmad, p.176.
  - 10 Mujawar, p.104.
  - 11 Naushad, p.155.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p.157.
  - 13 Sharif al Mujahid.