

Quaid-i-Azam and Muslim League's Emergence as a Mass Movement, 1937-40

Kishwar Sultana*

No movement can gather momentum until and unless it is supported and backed by the common people. The All India Muslim League not only politically emancipated the Muslims of British India but also played a prominent role in the amelioration of their social and economic conditions.

Like most great men of history Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah was a singularly gifted individual who had the capability to pass out of action into inaction and then out of inaction into action with an increasing realization of the responsibility and the importance of contribution he could make to the advancement of his community's welfare.¹

At the end of his self-imposed exile in London when he returned to Bombay towards the end of 1934, Jinnah had two tasks before him: 1) to re-organize the All India Muslim League and make it a mass movement, and 2) to lead the Muslims of the majority Muslim provinces to independent Pakistan. These goals he could achieve by benefiting from the polls shortly to be held in 1937 under the new reforms introduced under the Government of India Act 1935. Unfortunately, the All India Muslim League in these elections could not achieve more than 25 percent of the seats reserved for the Muslims. Though the results of these elections for

* Lecturer in History, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad.

1. Khalid B. Sayeed, "The Personality of Jinnah and his Political Strategy" in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright (eds.), *The Partition of India* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), p.281.

the All India Muslim League were better than the previous ones, yet for the achievement of freedom for the Muslims, the performance of the Muslim League was required to be more than 50 percent.

The impalement of Congress Ministries in 7 provinces out of 11 posed a great challenge both for Jinnah and the All India Muslim League. He revised his strategy to make the Muslim League a mass movement of the Muslims of South Asia and took a number of steps to be discussed hereafter. This was because of the Quaid's realization that unless the All India Muslim League was made a mass movement it would not emerge as the main spokesman of the Muslims, and be able to get the attention of the British Government and the Congress leaders to its demand for the creation of Pakistan. By taking a number of steps the All India Muslim League, by the end of 1939 had emerged as a mass movement. Thus it floated the idea of establishment of Pakistan on 23 March 1940 at the 27th session of the All India Muslim League held at Lahore.

Another factor which limited the influence of the All India Muslim League in Muslim majority province was existence of many rival regional Muslim organizations. The presence of these regional parties kept the people aloof from All Indian Muslim League. However, to remedy this situation, the following steps were taken after the elections:

- committees were formed to reorganize the Provincial Muslim League,
- new constitution was framed,
- socio-economic programmes were launched,
- new branches of the League were established, so as to enable the League to emerge as the sole representative body of the Muslims.

Jinnah initiated the task of the expansion of the League by giving it a new organizational set-up. According to the new strategy of All India Muslim League, primary Leagues were established at the grass roots level, each representing a ward or a Mohalla within a city. Representatives of the primary Leagues were constituted into the District/Tahsil Muslim League and were

entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the affairs of the League within their own areas. Various District League representatives were grouped into a Provincial Muslim League, representing a particular province. Provincial Muslim Leagues were given representation at the centre in the League Working Committee. The Working Committee in turn was placed under the ultimate and effective control of the Council of the All India Muslim League stipulating clearly in the constitution that all resolutions passed by the Working Committee would be subject to the approval and ratification of the Council. The Council was to be elected by Provincial Leagues from amongst its members. The President of the League was to be elected every year by the Council from amongst the nominees of different branches of the Muslim League.

This expansion of the League structure opened new avenues of association and participation within the League, attracting a host of Muslim interests and groups. The most enthusiastic response, of course, came from the urban middle classes, merchants, industrialists, traders, bankers, professional and other newly mobilized groups who rushed to join the League in order to avail themselves of the opportunity they had been looking for and which they now found impossible to resist in view of the promise held out by the Pakistan idea. The result was that not only heterogeneous groups like the educated, urban middle classes and the land-owning classes could now exist side by side but even some of the groups which did not have much liking for the other groups saw it fit to support the League.

In this connection another step was taken in the 25th session of the League, held in 1937 where it was suggested that immediate steps should be taken to put into effect an economic, social and educational programmes² to improve the lot of labourers and farmers and to encourage cottage industries and state enterprise. Emphasis was also laid on universal primary education, re-organization of higher education, scientific and technical education and introduction of military education. This resolution showed the influence of nationalist Muslims and a new accommodating spirit

2. See presidential address of Quaid-i-Azam. S. Sharifuddin Pirzada in, *Foundation of Pakistan*, Karachi, 1970, Vol.II, p.348.

towards the Hindu-Muslim problem for it tried to encourage use of local goods and *Khaddar*. The last provision in the programme asked the League to devise means for the attainment of full independence through co-operation with other political parties working to that end. In an earlier resolution of the same session 'Full Independence, had been declared League's objective', now the inclusion of the economic programme indicated some confusion and overlapping about the socio-economic and political objectives and programmes of the League.

In 1938 the atmosphere had changed and a committee was appointed with power to co-opt to chalk out a Five Year Plan for the educational, social and political advancement of Muslims and to submit its report within six months.³ However the matter did not proceed further. Some efforts were made in 1941 to launch a movement for carrying out the Muslim League programme into action on the eve of Quaid-i-Azam's birthday, because he did not want the Muslims to be transformed into a nation of shopkeepers but he wanted them to be initiated into higher economic activities of modern times.⁴ He encouraged them to organize their own banks, e.g. the Muslim Commercial Bank. Likewise, it was on his persuasion that the Orient Airways was launched. The Muslim Chamber of Commerce also owed its existence to the Quaid's leadership. In this way the Quaid prepared the party and the people for the future.

The new organizational set-up brought the League into close contact with the masses and made it a more effective and better working machine within the shortest possible time. The Madras League was organized and became functional within a year (1939).⁵ In the same year Bengal and Baluchistan Leagues were affiliated.⁶ Then followed the Punjab, Assam and Orissa Leagues in 1940. Meanwhile, the League branches were already working in other provinces, such as the N.W.F.P., Bihar and Bombay, etc. Soon the party began to gather greater momentum and within the next three years it was transformed into a movement and all the

3. *Ibid.*, The Quaid-i-Azam was disappointed.

4. Pirzada, *op.cit.*, p.360.

5. *Ibid.*, Resolution of All India Muslim League, pp.30-37

6. *Ibid.*, p.37.

other Muslim parties including the Jam'iyyatul-Ulama, Ahrar, Unionist, Momin Majlis and Proja Krishak paled into insignificance. Some of them in panic and desperation began to criticize the Quaid's private life, and a Khaksar even attempted to assassinate him. But all these futile efforts rebounded on them and they became more discredited with the Muslim community.

The phenomenal growth of the League may also be seen from the rise in its membership. In 1927 total membership of the League was said to be 1,330 only.⁷ In 1940 the figure rose to 88,838⁸ and during the next year it became 112,078.⁹

A similar picture emerges from a study of its sessions. In 1931 the quorum for the general session had to be lowered from 75 to 50. In 1936 two hundred delegates attended. By the next session the figure rose to 2,000. From 1940 onwards, all sessions of the League overflowed the seating capacity. In the famous Lahore session, an estimated one lakh people including delegates from all provinces attended the opening session which was described as the most representative gathering of the Muslims of British India.¹⁰ After 1940 the League won all the bye-elections against the Muslims seats. In 1946 elections it swept the polls securing 98 percent seats in the centre and 88 percent in the provinces.¹¹ The elections were fought on the Pakistan issue which was popularly supported by the Muslim masses.

In 1938 League was also helped by the progressive nature of its aims and objects. It continued to adapt its programme to the changing conditions while the Congress and other political organizations including some of the Muslim groups displayed a static and negative approach. From 1930 to 1940, the League continued to demand constitutional safeguards in the form of separate electorates, weightage, a weak centre and an addition to the number of Muslim majority provinces. The new League

7. *Ibid.*, Vol.I, p.lxxi.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, Vol.II, p.234.

11. *Times of India*, (API), 25 March, 1940.

leadership became convinced that accommodation with the Hindus was impossible.¹²

In 1939, greater efforts were made to bring the leaders of the Muslim majority and minority provinces together. Provincial leaders were invited to tour other provinces. For instance, a composite group of seven leaders from Punjab (3), N.W.F.P. (2), Sind (1) and Baluchistan (1) visited U.P., while leaders from C.P., U.P. and Bihar visited Pakistan regions.¹³

Besides the main restructuring of the organization of the League, efforts were made to reach all sections of the Muslim community. For this purpose, a Women's Wing of the League was also established.¹⁴ Side by side with it, the Muslim League published a series of reports cataloguing cases of alleged Congress persecution of Muslims in the Congress-ruled provinces. Cases of such persecution included the forcing of Muslim children to sing *Bande Mataram* (a song found in the anti-Muslim Bengali novel, *Anandamath*) and offer reverence before Mahatama Gandhi's portrait, the prohibition of cow slaughter, the elimination of Urdu and imposition of Hindi, etc. The Muslim League propagandists were capable of describing this alleged Congress persecution of Muslims in lurid terms.¹⁵ In those days, Congress' insistence on forming one-party cabinets in the provinces was a serious mistake. The Swiss pattern where racial and linguistic groups were represented in a composite cabinet was not unknown to the Congress. There was also a suggestion that matters which were of particular significance to certain communities, such as their social customs, religious establishments, language and literary traditions, should not be subject to legislation by the common central or provincial legislature, but should fall within the domain of special bodies or guilds, each of which represented one cultural or religious group.¹⁶ When the Congress Ministries resigned their offices in October 1939, on the plea that British India had been

12. *Ibid.*

13. Ahmad Shafi, *Haji Sir Abdullah Haroon: A Biography*, Karachi, p.150.

14. *Ibid.*, p.318.

15. Khalid B. Sayeed, *The Political System of Pakistan* (New Delhi: Concept Publishers, 1995), p.43.

16. *Ibid.*

dragged into war with Germany by the British Government without consulting Indian leaders, Jinnah seized this opportunity to call upon the Muslims to celebrate what he designated the "Deliverance Day" on 22 December 1939.

At this critical stage, Jinnah advised the Muslims to unite under the banner of All India Muslim League. He appealed to them to join the League which was striving hard to train Muslims to fight for their rights and for the amelioration of the community's conditions in general. They could maintain their position in the present political upheaval of the country only if they could make their voice a living one. He said that the Congress which had captured the control of 7 out of 11 provinces in British India, was trying to establish its hold over the remaining four provinces also. In three of these, it had to face severe opposition only from the Muslims who demanded their legitimate rights.

The high command of the Congress could not tolerate this and objected to it. They wanted to subdue the Muslims by threatening to do away with separate electorates. The Congress had become intoxicated with powers conferred by the new constitution. In those days, the words "justice, fair play and goodwill" used frequently by the Congress, were nothing save diplomatic expressions. The Quaid appealed to the Muslims not to be deceived by these words. In politics, these words could have a meaning only if the Muslims were one, united, organized and strengthened. Without that nobody would hear them. Without that they could have no voice.¹⁷

Deliverance Day was celebrated in Amalner, Panvel, Jalgaon, Akola, Bijapur, Burhanpur, Meerut, Mahablashwar, Surat and Nasik by adopting different methods such as the holding prayers in the mosques, arranging party gatherings, public demonstrations, and distribution of pamphlets highlighting the Muslim demand and reasons for separation.

Naturally, Quaid-i-Azam also felt gratified by the fact that the popular strength of the Muslims had been demonstrated in a peaceful manner and no untoward incident had taken place. He was very happy to find that the Day was observed with complete success and in an orderly and disciplined manner in the spirit

17. *Times of India*, 6th December 1937.

which was expected of the great community. He also believed that the significance of all these things could not be overlooked. Another aspect of the Day of Deliverance was that about all the minority groups supported the call of the All India Muslim League.¹⁸

By the celebration of the Day of Deliverance the All India Muslim League demonstrated throughout British India, especially in the Muslim majority provinces and the states that it had really emerged as a mass movement successfully led by the Quaid. It was for the first time in All India Muslim League's history that the party had attained a challenging position both for the British Government and all other opponents.

During 1937-38, Jinnah and Gandhi exchanged letters, which were of no great intrinsic importance, but clearly brought out for the first time, the fundamental difference of outlook between the two organizations they led. In his letter of 3 March 1938, Jinnah put the crux of the matter in two sentences. 'You recognize the All India Muslim League', he wrote, "as the one authoritative and representative organisation of Muslims in India, and on the other hand, you represent the Congress and other Hindus throughout the country. It is only on that basis we can proceed further and devise a machinery of approach." Gandhi replied, "He could not represent either the Congress or the Hindus in the sense you mean", but promised to use his moral influence with the Hindus to secure an "honourable settlement". Nehru's long letter of 6 April 1938, tried to reply to a list of inquiries made by Jinnah. The important thing, in his letter was that the Muslim League was "an important communal organization and we deal with it as such."¹⁹ Jinnah replied that unless the Congress recognized the Muslim League "on a footing of complete equality and is prepared as such to negotiate for a Hindu-Muslim settlement", there was no chance of a peaceful solution to the Indian problem.²⁰

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Times of India*, 7 April 1938.

20. *Ibid.*, 12 April 1938, Full text of Jinnah's letter.

During January-February 1940, Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah met Viceroy and explained the terms and conditions for co-operation which were as follow:

1. Government of India Act 1935 must go;
1. Constitutional problem should be tackled afresh;
2. Separate Muslim Nation. "That in order to make the Muslim right of self-determination really effective the Muslims shall have a separate national home in the shape of an autonomous state."²¹

On the other hand, the Working Committee of the All India Muslim League decided to send a delegation on behalf of the Muslim League to visit England as soon as possible in order to put the case of Muslim India before the British public, Parliament and His Majesty's Government.²² Fazlul Haq, Sikandar Hayat Khan, Nazimuddin and Ch. Khaliqzaman were to be included in this delegation. Strangely enough, the Viceroy's response to all this was very positive. In this meeting, Jinnah informed the Viceroy of the great importance attached by the Muslim and other minorities to the safeguarding of their position in any settlement or discussions that might take place. The Viceroy assured that His Majesty's Government were fully alive to the necessity of safeguarding the legitimate interests of the minorities.

For the establishment of Pakistan various proposals were sent to Quaid-i-Azam to be discussed by the All India Muslim League Council and the Working Committees. On 4 February, 1940, All India Muslim League discussed alternative constitutional schemes to safeguard the rights of Muslims of India and in particular the schemes of Sir Abdullah Haroon, Ch. Khaliqzaman and Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan. Finally, on the recommendation of the Quaid, the Working Committee decided in favour of creating separate Muslim zones and their separation from the rest of India.²³ Thus it was for the first time that the scheme of separation of Muslim India from Hindu India was decided by the Working

21. *Ibid.*, 6 February 1940.

22. *Ibid.*, 5 February 1940.

23. It was on February 4, 1940 that the Working Committee of All India Muslim League decided to demand the division of India.

Committee of All India Muslim League. Now it was the question of its ratification in the general session of All India Muslim League, which was done on 23 March 1940.²⁴

In the British secret Quarterly Reports to the British Government, All India Muslim League's strength was witnessed specially after October 1938. In April 1938, it was reported that All India Muslim League was attaining such a position which "can challenge the supremacy of the Congress in Indian politics."²⁵ By December 1939, Muslim League had become an "authoritative and representative organization of Muslim of British India". In this way, strength of All India Muslim League was recognized in the British circles.²⁶ Immediately after the start of 2nd World War, on 3 September 1939, Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy, wrote to Lord Zetland, Secretary of State for India, on 5 September 1939 and conveyed to him his impression about Jinnah in which he admitted that keeping in view rising popular strength of the All India Muslim League, he could not say "NO" to the proposals advanced by Jinnah.²⁷ Thus the British Government was made to accept the strength of All India Muslim League which was acting as a formidable forum behind the idea of Pakistan. This challenge of Muslim League continued to grow both against the Indian National Congress as well as the British Government even after the adoption of the 'Pakistan Resolution' on 23 March 1940 by the party.

24. Resolution No.34 of Working Committee of All India Muslim League.

25. *Quarterly Survey of the Political and Constitutional Position in British India, November 1937-Jan. 1938*, F.125/142, British Library (OIOC), London.

26. *Quarterly Survey of the Political and Constitutional Position in British India, November 1937-Jan. 1938*, F.125/143, British Library (OIOC), London.

27. Linlithgow to Zetland, 5 Sept. 1939 (Letter) *Lord Linlithgow's Papers*, F.125/08, British Library (OIOC), London.