



Book Review

The All India Muslim League From the Late Nineteenth Century to 1919 - A History of the Growth and Consolidation of Political Organisation

By Muhammad Saleem Ahmad,

Bahawalpur: Ilham Publishers, 1988.

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The All India Muslim League played a leading role in the first half of the present century in uniting the Muslims of India into a nation. It provided them with a platform from which they were able to promote unity in their ranks, and take steps for the safeguarding and preservation of their rights and interests. *The All India Muslim League* by Muhammad Saleem Ahmad (who is the Chairman of the Departments of History and Pakistan Studies, in the Islamic University, Bahawalpur), presents an insight into the rise, growth and consolidation of the Muslim League as a political organization under the British Raj.


The book highlights aspects of the Muslim League, not studied so far in depth in other works. The study is part of a broader treatment of the Muslim League history which will cover the growth of Muslim League upto 1935. We hope that the next part of the study will shed light on aspects of the League

organization in the provinces, and take up relations between its central and provincial organizations, which do not find a place in the present work.

The name of the book appears to be something of a misnomer, since it claims to study the Muslim League in a period extending back to the last two decades of the nineteenth century, while the Muslim League came into existence in 1906. However, it may be said in defence of the title that events like the formation of political organizations like Muslim League do not come about overnight, nor does the idea suddenly dawn out of the blue. The formal constitution of such a body is generally preceded by a fairly long process of serious thinking and deliberations, as well as a number of preliminary steps in the nature of preparatory spadework. In order to make the story complete and fully comprehensible the narration of this pre-natal phase is also quite crucial. A recent publication entitled *Muslim League Documents 1900-1947* (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 1990,) can be cited as an example.

Saleem Ahmad's work has broken fresh ground by assessing the organization of the League essentially in the context of the social background of the Muslims, and by giving an account of its actual working as a political party. The book under review is a doctoral thesis. It draws on original source material, such as Muslim League papers and other collections deposited in the Archives of the Freedom Movement, University of Karachi, and the official documents preserved in libraries of India Office, School of Oriental and African Studies, and Cambridge University. This has made the book under reference both reliable as well as valuable.

Saleem Ahmad's work as a whole examines the socio-political and economic problems of the Muslims



during the period extending from the last two decades of the nineteenth century to 1919. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was no organized voice in the all-India politics apart from the Congress. By the close of the second decade of the present century the Congress was still very noticeable, but an all-India political organization had also emerged as a voice of the Muslims. It was heard by the government and was treated as an equal to other Indian national organizations.

The portrayal of Muslim League in the context of socio-economic forces and political ideas emanating from the British rule helps us to understand the Muslim League in a new light. Its role as well as structure was responsible for its elitist activity. Saleem Ahmad traces the roots of the Muslim League to the societies and associations in the nineteenth century that sprang up essentially in response to challenges arising from British policies on language and land settlement. In addition, the new Hindu hegemony that emerged due to Hindu revivalism and economic ascendancy presented a threat to Muslim position in society. It was in these organizations that demands were formulated and set forth for a share in government service, separate representation in local bodies and the Councils.

At the outset Saleem Ahmad has divided the Muslim society in two classes, the elite known as *ashraf* and the commoners as *ajlaf*. The *ashraf* comprised descendants, genuine or otherwise, of the conquerors and rulers from other parts of the Muslim world; and the *ajlaf* were of local origin, converts or their descendants, rooted in indigenous culture and pattern of life.

The *ashraf* numbered about 4 million (7 percent of the total Muslim population). They were identified on



the basis of their language, Mughal dress, manners, habits, tastes in arts and architecture, literature and other aspects of life. They avoided the local vernacular. First Persian and later the Urdu language, became a passport to success in life. The elite served the state in high military and civil positions. It was only when these interests were threatened that Muslims were stirred into action. As such, Saleem Ahmad has linked remnants of the Mughal aristocracy to the leadership of the Muslim League. He describes the early activities of the social and political organization of *ashraf* in different provinces and points out how they were linked by common features.

Saleem Ahmad's study negates the impression that Muslim separatism was a product of British policy of *divide et impera* or that Muslim national struggle was an artificial process, without positive values and political direction. The change in the government of Great Britain in 1906, and Morley's announcement stating that the people of India would eventually decide the policy of India, led Muslims to act. Yet it was the *ashraf* that constituted the Simla Deputation. The memorial it presented to the Viceroy was a charter of *ashraf* grievances. By the formation of the Muslim League a year later, the *ashraf* got an opportunity to assert themselves in an organized manner. Issues such as education, employment and separate representation became fundamental for their separate cultural and political identity. The *ashraf* were driven to action by the threat of Hindu revivalism and government policies.

Major changes took place in the organization of the League between 1910-1913. The traditional society of the *ashraf* by now had come of age and was ready to take an independent stand. Its headquarters were transferred from Aligarh to Lucknow. There was a



change in leadership, from the one belonging to the Syed Ahmad's school to that of the youth of the Aligarh school, many of whom were lawyers. The young Muslim leadership after graduating from Aligarh took up a professional interest in politics. With the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 a new thinking emerged. The objectives of Muslim League changed from just 'protection of Muslim interests', to the 'protection of Muslim interest with the addition of winning a suitable self government under the aegis of British rule'.

This thinking helped the Muslim League to come to an understanding with the Congress and paved the way for Lucknow Pact in 1916. The scheme of constitutional representation and constitutional reforms in 1919 conceded the Muslims greater representation in all the Muslim minority provinces, than warranted by their proportion. This proved to be an injustice to Muslim majority provinces of Bengal and the Punjab. The *ashraf* had apparently overstretched themselves and their hegemony was soon to be challenged by rival political organizations.

The defeat of Turkey at the end of World War I was a real test of not only the Muslim League's leadership but the elitist prerogative and authority of the *ashraf* class. Since it did not serve the political interest of the *ashraf* to take a stand on religious issues such as Khilafat, it relegated itself to the background in sharp contrast to the Congress which allied itself with the Khilafat Committee on the Khilafat issue. The Muslim League did not surface during the mass political movement of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation. It was not until 1927 when constitutional issues again came to the fore that Muslim League once again became active.

Saleem Ahmad's hypothesis is that Muslim



League was formed more for the preservation of the rights and privileges of the Muslim elite rather than the fact that they were backward and were discriminated against by the British. Muslims were brought together by common interests. They constituted a powerful group by their ownership of land and strength in government service. The introduction of elective government not only threatened their power but also modified the influence of the bureaucracy. The U.P. Muslims were the heart of Muslim separatism. It was they who founded and led the organization which represented Muslim interests in Indian politics. This explains why the Muslim League was more active in U.P.

The elitist thinking was all prevailing in the early years of the Muslim League and this continued throughout its history except for a brief period in the mid-40s when politics was transformed from the politics of the few in the Councils, into the struggle of the many in the towns and villages. After partition the past historical thinking re-emerged. The privileged position of the Muslim aristocracy was once again defended and safeguarded by the Muslim League as an organization. It had little or no social or political contact with the lower classes, i.e. peasants and the workers. The Muslim elite continued to monopolize the institutions of government, such as bureaucracy, army and judiciary. The elective principle was ignored, and the large majority remained illiterate, ignorant and backward.

It is a good research work, but unfortunately it suffers from avoidable errors of printing for which the publisher has duly apologized.

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