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Khilafat Movement [1919-1924]

The Lucknow pact showed that it was possible for middle-class, English-educated Muslims and Hindus to arrive at an amicable settlement on Hindu-Muslim constitutional and political problems. This unity reached its climax during the Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation Movements.

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire faced dismemberment. Under the leadership of the Ali Brothers, Maulana Muhammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali, the Muslims of South Asia launched the historic Khilafat Movement to try and save it. Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi linked the issue of Swaraj with the Khilafat issue to associate Hindus with the movement. The ensuing movement was the first countrywide popular movement.

The Muslims of India had a strong feeling of identity with the world community of Islam. They had seen the decline in the political fortunes of Islam as the European powers conquered the Muslim lands one after the other. The Anglo-Russian convention of 1908 had reduced their next-door neighbor Iran to a mere dependency. Afghanistan also suffered as it was a bone of contention between Russia and Britain, and was now under the latter's sphere of influence.

The general impression among the Muslims of India was that the western powers were waging a war against Islam throughout the world in order to rob it of all its power and influence. The Ottoman Empire was the only Muslim power that had maintained a semblance of authority and the Muslims of India wanted to save the Islamic political power from extinction.

As an institution, the Khilafat had a checkered past. It had originally migrated from Medina to Damascus and from Damascus to Baghdad. For sometime it was located in Egypt, then it fell to the lot of Turkey, very much as a prize.

The Turkish Sultans had claimed to be the caliphs of the Muslim world. As long as the Mughal Empire had been in existence, the Muslims of India had not recognized their claim. At this critical juncture, when the Muslims of the Sub-continent had no sovereign ruler of their own, they began to see the necessity of recognizing the Sultan of Turkey as their caliph. Tipu Sultan was the first Indian Muslim who, having been frustrated in his attempts to gain recognition from the Mughals, had turned to the Sultan of Turkey to establish a legal right to his throne. The European powers had played a leading role in reducing the might of Turkey in Europe to Eastern Thrace, Constantinople and the straits in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). To seek revenge, the Turks decided to side with the Germans against the Allied Forces. The Indian Muslims supported this decision.

Muhammad Ali argued that for Muslims to accept mandates over Iraq, Syria and Palestine would amount to a total disregard of the wishes of the Holy Prophet (S. A. W.). Thus the Muslims of India launched the Tehrik-i-Khilafat. The objectives were as follows:

1. To maintain the Turkish Caliphate.

2. To protect the holy places of the Muslims.

3. To maintain the unity of the Ottoman Empire.

There was absolute unanimity among the Indian Muslims. Though separated from Turkey by thousands of miles, they were determined to fight Turkey's battle from India.

Rioting started in Amritsar on April 10, 1919. On April 13, 1919, a crowd assembled at the Jalianwala Bagh. These protestors were unaware of a ban that had just been imposed by the martial law administrators on public meetings. Sir Michael O'Duiyer opened fire on the crowd, resulting in 379 dead and 1,200 wounded. This incident is known as the Jalianwala Bagh Tragedy.

When the terms of the Treaty of Serves were announced in 1920, it caused deep resentment among the Muslims. They felt betrayed. In June 1920, 90 influential Muslims wrote to Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, informing him of

their intent to start a non-cooperation movement against the government from August, until the terms of the treaty with Turkey were revised.

But this was to no avail as the British Prime Minister Lloyd George was an implacable enemy of Turkey and by association, of the Indian Khilafat Movement. When the Indian Khilafat deputation visited England in 1920 to put their views before the British Government, he ignored them and the deputation met with failure.

A tragic offshoot of the Khilafat Movement was the Hijrat Movement proposed by Jamiyat-al-Ulema-i-Hind. When a land is not safe for Islam, a Muslim has two options; Jihad or Hijrat. Around 925 eminent Muslims signed this fatwa. According to one version, the idea of Hijrat was originated from Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

In the North West Frontier Province and Sindh, hundreds of families sold their land and property and departed in the direction of the Khyber Pass, to migrate to Afghanistan, a brotherly independent Muslim state. In the month of August alone, some 18,000 Indian Muslims migrated to Afghanistan. Afghanistan, a poor country, was unable to absorb so large an influx of population and sealed its borders. It is difficult to establish who was responsible for misleading such a large number of Muslims.

Another tragic event was the Moplah Uprising. In mid of August 1921, agrarian riots broke out in Nilambur. The Moplah peasants revolted against the Hindu landlord's oppressive policies, which are in alliance with the British. The Hindu landlords redistributed their lands and the Moplahs, who had been suffering, rose in revolt. A pitched battle between the British regiment and the Moplahs killed several Europeans. Four thousand Moplahs were killed in action and tens of thousands were injured.

Then there was the notorious Moplah Train Tragedy. Around a hundred prisoners, confined in a closed and almost airtight goods van, were transported by rail. When the door was opened, 66 Moplahs were found suffocated to death and the remaining 34 were on the verge of collapse.

All this was followed by Hindu-Muslim communal clashes, particularly in Multan and Bengal in September 1922. The Sanghattan and Shuddi movements were offshoots of these communal rioting, which were anti-Muslim and aimed at Hindu revivalism.

Besides other events, the arrest of the Ali brothers in September 1921 gave a severe blow to the Khilafat Movement. Gandhi, who was using this movement to accelerate India's advance towards Swaraj, also withdrew his support for the Muslim cause in the aftermath of the Chauri Chaura incident in February 1922. Using the excuse that the national volunteers were responsible for the murder of 21 policemen, thus leading to violence, he called off the whole movement.

In 1924, Turks under Mustafa Kamal were consolidating their position in Turkey. They announced an end to the Khilafat. It was a great blow to Indian Khilafatists who had been campaigning on behalf of Turkey and Khilafat. Gradually the enthusiasm of the people died down and the Khilafat Conference and Committee developed new interests and in a short time nothing but their name remained.

Although the Khilafat Movement failed to achieve its declared objectives, it carried political awakening to large masses of Muslims. It was during the Khilafat days that representatives of Indian Muslims came into contact with eminent personages from other Muslims countries to save the semblance of unity in the world of Islam.

The Khilafat Movement was an asset for the struggle of Pakistan. It made clear to the Indian Muslims to trust neither the British nor the Hindus, but to look to their own strengths for self-preservation.

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