

# *Rallying the Qaum: The Muslim League in the United Provinces, 1937–1939*

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## **Abstract**

This paper re-examines the nature of the Muslim League's mobilization of the UP Muslims during the period of Congress party rule and the extent to which it was successful in emerging as their 'authoritative, representative organization'. In the light of such a re-examination, the paper makes two arguments. First, in contrast to the existing historiography which highlights the role of Jinnah in the ML's revival, this paper underlines the agency of the local leadership of the ML in this process. Second, the paper argues that even though the ML emerged as a popular political party among the UP Muslims in this period, its strength still remained uncertain. This became evident during the *Madhe Sahaba* agitation between 1938 and 1939 that led to serious tensions and riots between Shias and Sunnis in the city of Lucknow. These tensions threatened to fracture the political base of the ML in the UP besides snowballing into a wider all-India conflict. During this crisis the ML stood aside helplessly, unable to exert its authority as the 'premier' organization of the Indian Muslims. These divisions within the Muslim community in the ML's putative bastion in the UP demonstrate that the party still had a task ahead in terms of rallying the *Qaum*.

## **Introduction**

The political rise of the Muslim League (ML) in the United Provinces (UP) in the period between the provincial elections in 1937 and the 'Pakistan' resolution in 1940 has been considered by historians as crucial for the Partition of India and the formation of Pakistan in

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1947.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that during this period of Congress party rule in the UP, a revived and united ML under the strong leadership of M.A. Jinnah, was successful in rallying the Muslims under one party, one flag and one leader.<sup>2</sup> The ideology of Muslim nationalism is widely understood to have been forged by the ML in the UP, before it was transmitted to the Muslim majority provinces where Pakistan eventually came into existence. The ML's success in the UP is thus seen as crucial in the process of the transformation of Muslims from a minority community in undivided India, to a separate nation with aspirations to statehood.<sup>3</sup>

Existing historiography has explained the ML's resurgence in the UP in terms of the fiasco over ministry-making, the subsequent controversies over Hindi-Urdu, *Vande Mataram*, the Wardha scheme of education, and deteriorating communal relations between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>4</sup> It is further contended that these issues only heightened the ongoing alienation of the Muslims from the Congress since the collapse of the Non-Cooperation movement, thus allowing the ML to successfully portray the Congress government in the UP as Hindu *Raj*, intent upon destroying Muslim cultural and political identity.<sup>5</sup> The ML's political drive is also credited with checking

<sup>1</sup> C.H. Phillips & M.D. Wainwright (eds.) *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives, 1935–1947*, London, 1970; Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit*, Berkeley, 1962; Chaudhry Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan*, Lahore, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Salil Misra, *A Narrative of Communal Politics, Uttar Pradesh, 1937–39*, Delhi, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Saad R. Khairi, *Jinnah Reinterpreted: The Journey from Indian Nationalism to Muslim Statehood*, Karachi, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Deepak Pandey, 'Congress-Muslim League Relations, 1937–39: The Parting of Ways', *Modern Asian Studies* 4(12): 626–652, 1978; Sunil Chander, 'Congress-Raj Conflict and the Rise of the Muslim League, 1937–39', *Modern Asian Studies*, 21(2): 303–328, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh: Class, Community and Nation in Northern India, 1920–1940*, London, 2002, pp.52, 95–96, 174–175. Pandey has characterized this lack of Muslim support for the Congress as symptomatic of its 'imperfect mobilization' of the Indian masses. See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization*, Delhi, 1978. Muslim alienation from the Congress has been explained as a result of the growing Hinduisation of the Congress and its greater tendency to deploy Hindu imagery while imagining the nation from the early 1930s. See William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, Cambridge, 2004. Other scholars have explained growing Muslim 'separatism' as an autochthonous development powered by Muslim self-imagination as a distinct people whose political identity was derived primarily from their religious identity. See Francis Robinson, 'Congress and the Muslims', in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, Delhi, 2003 (paperback edition), pp. 210–230; Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India 1860–1947*, Cambridge, 1989.

the Congress party's momentous attempts to attract Muslims into the nationalist movement through its own Muslim Mass Contact Programme (MMCP). Its overwhelming success in the by-elections to the Muslim seats in the UP is seen as the surest indicator of the emergence of the party as the 'authoritative' Muslim political organization in the UP. It is therefore assumed that a unified UP Muslim community was already at the vanguard of the Muslim nation when the 'Pakistan' resolution was passed by the ML at its Lahore session in 1940.

This paper however seeks to re-examine the nature of the ML's political mobilization in the UP, and the extent to which it was successful in rallying the Muslims under its banner. In the light of such re-examination, this paper makes two arguments. First, in contrast to the existing historiography which highlights the contribution of M.A. Jinnah in the ML's grand rise, the paper focuses on the role played by the UP Muslim League (UPML) in reviving the party. Second, this paper argues that even though the ML gained considerable success in its ideological campaign against the Congress, and reinvented itself from an elite moribund organization into a mass based Muslim party, its strength still remained uncertain. This became evident during the *Madhe Sahaba* agitation in 1938 and 1939 that triggered riots between the Shias and the Sunnis in different parts of the UP, and especially in the city of Lucknow. These riots threatened to fracture the ML's political base in the UP besides snowballing into a wider all-India conflict as partisans from both sects poured into Lucknow from different parts of India and clashed with each other. During these tensions, the ML stood aside helplessly, unable to exert its authority as the self described 'sole representative organization of the Indian Muslims'.

The ML's lack of initiative attracted competition from other Muslim political groups attempting to emerge as serious political players at both the UP and all-India level. The most prominent were the Khaksars of the Punjab, whose spirited intervention was aimed at forcibly resolving differences between the Shias and Sunnis. The Khaksars were keen to garner the prestige that resolving a fratricidal conflict within the Muslim community could bring, in order to emerge as an influential Muslim party across India. The ML's paralysis and signal failure to intercede in the context of the Shia-Sunni dispute points to the fact that its control over the politics of the UP Muslims was far from complete as has been assumed in the existing historiography. It further brings into focus the difficulties that still lay in the path of rallying the *Qaum*.

## Re-evaluating Muslim Politics in the United Provinces

Any analysis of the changes in UP Muslim politics in the aftermath of the 1937 elections would be inadequate without foregrounding the Congress party's campaign of Muslim 'mass contacts' and the ML's retaliatory initiative in response. The ML's success in repulsing the Congress political challenge was after all crucial in the process of its own revival and emergence as a major political party. Existing analyses of UP Muslim politics in the aftermath of the 1937 elections have largely ignored the contested question of Muslim mass contacts. Instead, they have laid emphasis upon either the long-term Muslim alienation from the Congress or focused on the controversy over ministry-making and the acrimonious campaigns initiated by the ML against the subsequent policies of the Congress government.<sup>6</sup>

The only exception in this regard is the important essay on the Congress MMCP by Mushirul Hasan. Discounting the argument about long-term Muslim alienation from the Congress, Hasan argues that this process became marked only after the 1937 elections. For Hasan, the crucial reason behind this tragic outcome was the withdrawal of the MMCP by the Congress party. He pointedly notes that the MMCP was wound up after two *successful* years as a consequence of right wing pressures within the Congress. The Congress right wing was fearful of a Muslim influx into the party and a consequent Nehru-Socialist-Muslim domination over the Congress organization. The programme

<sup>6</sup> The argument regarding long term Muslim alienation from the Congress overemphasizes the problem. While Muslim estrangement from the Congress was indeed evident during the Civil Disobedience movement, the success of the Muslim Unity Board comprised of 'Nationalist Muslims' closely aligned to the Congress Swarajists in the 1934 elections demonstrated the continuing relevance of the Congress in UP Muslim politics. These elections also pointed to the weakness of other Muslim political groups such as the Muslim Conference and the old Muslim League. The 1937 elections were fought by the Congress and the newly revived ML in a widely known informal alliance against the landlord-led National Agriculturalist Party (NAP). A number of Muslims elected on the ML ticket were Congress sympathizers. Most importantly, the fractured nature of Muslim verdict in the 1937 elections vividly underlined the fact that no singly party held sway over the UP Muslims. Thus if the Congress had a long way to go before it could boast of substantial Muslim support, so did other Muslim parties such as the Muslim League. The second line of argument with its focus on ML attacks on policies of the Congress government such as the Wardha scheme of education, Vande Mataram etc., though very important in explaining the ML's rise, ignores the prior controversy surrounding the Congress party's MMCP and the ML strategy against this programme.

was therefore starved of funds, there was apathy towards it, and at many places the Hindu Mahasabhaites in the Congress subverted the programme.<sup>7</sup> Hasan contends that the right wing also took active measures to keep the Muslims out of Provincial and District Congress Committees and worked against Congress Muslims in the elections, as evidenced in the cases of Nisar Sherwani in Bundelkhand and Saifuddin Kitchlew in Amritsar. As Hasan ruefully concludes,

This campaign was conceived at a crucial historical juncture and was a significant move in the right direction. Pursued purposefully, it had the potential of weaning large sections of the Muslim community away from the Muslim League camp. By letting the mass contact campaign peter out, the Congress allowed Jinnah, perhaps involuntarily to take advantage of deteriorating communal relations and rally his community around the divisive symbol of a separate Muslim homeland.<sup>8</sup>

While sections of the Congress right wing may indeed have been uncomfortable with the programme, Hasan's argument about a successful MMCP being subverted by the Congress right wing is unconvincing, given the lack of evidence of any concerted effort by the right wing to scuttle the MMCP.<sup>9</sup> Besides, it needs to be noted that the programme ended in failure. Any attempt therefore to understand the failure of the Congress campaign and the ML's success, instead, must involve a detailed examination of the nature of the propaganda offensives launched by both parties in their quest for the hearts and minds of the UP Muslims. In this regard, the two campaigns held up different concepts of the *Qaum* which became the focus of furious debates in the Muslim community. We must indeed turn to these contending definitions of the *Qaum* that were offered by the two campaigns and the context within which the contest between them was played out.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mushirul Hasan, 'The Muslim Mass Contacts Campaign: Analysis of a Strategy of Political Mobilization', p. 155, in Mushirul Hasan (ed), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy, and Mobilization*, Delhi, 2002 (paperback edition).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> Salil Misra also argues that there is no evidence in this regard but attributes the failure of the programme to the long-term alienation of the Muslims from the Congress. See Salil Misra, pp. 240–242.

<sup>10</sup> This paper does not dwell on the debate between Maulana Husain Ahmad Madni and the poet-philosopher Mohammad Iqbal on the concept of *Muttahida Qaumiyat* which has been discussed elsewhere. See the Introduction by Barbara Metcalfe to Husain Ahmad Madni, *Composite Nationalism and Islam* translated by Mohammad Anwer Husain and Hasan Imam, Delhi, 2005.

### **The Congress Left wing, Muslim Mass Contacts and the New Definition of the *Qaum***

The Congress programme of 'mass contacts' reflected the ideological orientation of the left wing under Nehru and its rising assertiveness within the party. In the aftermath of the party's overwhelming success in the 1937 elections, which underlined its reputation as India's premier nationalist organization, Nehru was strongly opposed to the Congress entering the new assemblies or accepting offices. Nehru feared that such a move would infect the party with an effete reformist mentality and lock the organization in a collaborative enterprise with the British *Raj*. Instead, he wanted to utilize the momentum gained by the election campaign to continue mobilization of the masses with the object of preparing them for a decisive confrontation with the *Raj*. As the Congress remained deadlocked on these questions, Nehru insisted that keeping up the revolutionary momentum outside the legislatures was far more important than Congress representatives assuming office. The programme of mass contacts, under which peasants, workers, Muslims and other groups would be mobilized, emanated from this line of thinking.

Muslim mass-contact campaigns were specifically aimed at increasing the Congress party's popularity among Muslims. In the UP itself, all of its nine candidates contesting Muslim seats were unsuccessful in the 1937 elections. Nehru however refused to believe that the Muslims were not with the Congress, as throughout the election campaign he had come across Muslim voters asking him for directions on how to cast their votes.<sup>11</sup> He was convinced that the Congress would have done better if it had put up more Muslim candidates or campaigned harder in the Muslim constituencies. Nevertheless, Nehru declared that the elections had awakened the Muslim masses and that they were looking for 'the right leadership and direction'. The time had come to cast aside the older tactic of pacts and agreements with a 'reactionary' Muslim leadership and instead to reach out to the masses directly.<sup>12</sup>

When asked to explain how he planned to make millions of Muslims rally behind the Congress party, Nehru declared that he would do so by approaching them as 'non-Muslims, i.e., approach them with the

<sup>11</sup> S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 8, New Delhi, 1975, p.22. (henceforth SWJN).

<sup>12</sup> SWJN, vol.8, p. 128.

economic issue. . . . My appeal will not be to the top leaders but to the masses with whom the economic reality is bound to prevail.<sup>13</sup> As Nehru explained, the communal problem was essentially a ‘conflict between upper middle class Hindus and Muslims for jobs and power under the new constitution’. It had no connection with the masses, for not a single communal demand made any reference to them. Communal demands referred only to ‘seats in the legislature or to the various kinds of jobs which might be available in the future’.<sup>14</sup> The masses themselves were not in the least bothered by the communal question. All they desired was economic relief from their crushing poverty, and in pursuit of this they were agitating for political freedom.<sup>15</sup> *Dal-bhat* was described by Nehru as the primary question confronting Hindu and Muslim masses alike. It was the one issue on which Hindus and Muslims could set aside their past antagonisms and unite to fight against British imperialism.

A separate department was set up at the party headquarters at Anand Bhavan in Allahabad under Nehru’s lieutenant, Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf, in order to run the campaign. Among Ashraf’s colleagues at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) office were Z.A. Ahmed, who was in charge of the Economic Affairs cell, and Sajjad Zaheer, who was a member of the team but with no specific responsibilities. All three were communists who were active in the Congress Socialist party.<sup>16</sup> The campaign itself primarily involved organizing public meetings in order to enroll Muslims into the Congress, and most importantly, starting a new Urdu newsweekly, *Hindustan*, to deliver the Congress message to the Muslims.<sup>17</sup> The message was replete with slogans demanding land for the landless, security of tenure for peasant proprietors, employment for the

<sup>13</sup> *SWJN*, vol.7, p. 277.

<sup>14</sup> *SWJN*, vol.8, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> P.N. Chopra (ed), *Towards Freedom*, Vol. 1, 1937, pp. 24–25.

<sup>16</sup> The programme was run exclusively by Muslims within the Congress. Nehru and Ashraf however tried to dispel the notion that the mass contacts programme was ‘a communal movement dealing with Muslims only’. As Nehru noted ‘Our programme is identical in this respect for Muslims and Hindus and others; only in order to draw the attention of our workers to work amongst the Muslim masses have we talked of Muslim mass contacts.’ *SWJN*, vol. 8, p. 419. Also see AICC Papers/ File G-74, Weekly Meeting of Heads of Department attended by Nehru, Kripalani, K.M. Ashraf, and D. Narsinh. At this meeting Nehru suggested that the name Muslim mass contacts be substituted by some other ‘better’ name.

<sup>17</sup> The newspaper was started as a Company. The Directors of the company were G.B. Pant, Rafi Kidwai, Narendra Dev, Hussain Zaheer, K.M. Ashraf, and Abdul Aleem.

unemployed, fair wages for workers, Hindu Muslim unity, besides criticism of the zamindars and 'toadies of the Raj'.

Following Nehru's class analysis of the communal problem, the MMCP put forth a class-based definition of the *Qaum* that the Congress wanted to welcome into its fold, namely, that of Muslim peasants and workers. This new definition also involved a significant challenge to existing ideas of Muslim community with its own distinctive culture or politics. Thus, in an essay, 'Congress Membership and the Question of Muslim Culture', K.M. Ashraf denied that there was anything like a 'Muslim culture' that could be identified with 70 million Muslims in India.<sup>18</sup> A great majority of Indian Muslims, Ashraf argued, had their culture and origin among the Hindus. The culture of these neo-Muslims who formed 85% of the country's Muslim population was thus different from what was popularly known as 'Muslim culture'.

Muslim culture, Ashraf further explained, was a category that changed according to historical contexts. In pre-British times it was the culture of the *Badshahs*, while today it was the culture of feudal elites, a microscopic minority who claimed descent from the Arabs. The culture of the *Badshahs*, he noted approvingly, was marked by great internal diversity and openness, there being no rigid uniformity among the Muslims at that time. Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, Tartari were all languages of the Muslims. High class Muslims delighted in wearing Western, Eastern, Roman, and Indian clothes, and, in matters of faith, doctrine, and devotion, there was great diversity among them. Thus, Shias, Sunnis, and Kharijites had their own set of beliefs, rituals and practices. And yet, Ashraf emphasized, this historical diversity had never threatened the Muslims and was indeed a symbol and source of their strength.

In contrast, the 'Muslim culture' of the current feudal elites represented by Sir Syed's school was so feeble, that it felt threatened if someone wore a Gandhi cap or a few Hindus began to propagate Hindi. As Ashraf sharply commented, 'If you don't wear a particular type of dress or don't speak high flown Urdu, it becomes difficult for you to be seen as a proper Muslim. The truth is that pure and minted (*taksali*) Muslims are those fortunate people who were raised in the atmosphere of Delhi or Lucknow, or if they wear the dresses

<sup>18</sup> K.M. Ashraf, 'Congress ki Shirkat aur Musalmanon ki Tehzeeb ka Sawal', *Hindustan*, 5 September, 1937. Also see *Searchlight*, 25 and 27 April, 1937, for a report of Ashraf's speeches in Bihar. AICC Papers/ File G-68/1937.



of Deoband or the Firangi Mahalis.<sup>19</sup> This culture therefore stressed a stifling uniformity and rigidity which Ashraf saw as related to its emergence under the shadow of the colonial education system. It had no organic connection with the earlier genuine traditions which had received a death blow in 1857, and all that remained now in the name of Muslim culture were dead traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Ashraf was thus quite unsentimental in asking for the abandonment of both these ‘dead’ versions of Muslim culture, and their replacement by a new culture which would serve the demands of the *Qaum* in this day and age. This new culture would be forged in the crucible of struggle against British imperialism and its indigenous support structures, primarily led by the middle and the working classes. This was because the middle class was plagued by unemployment, while the condition of the masses had become truly wretched under British rule. In this context, Ashraf viewed the Muslim middle and working classes as possessing far greater revolutionary potential than any other social group because of their greater material and cultural impoverishment under British rule.<sup>21</sup> A revolutionary vanguard would provide the lead in the production of this new culture and Ashraf and his comrades saw themselves as part of this group. As Ashraf wrote, ‘We are today engaged in constructing a new and living *tamaddun*. Our political and social struggle is a prelude to this new *tamaddun*.’<sup>22</sup>

This new culture, however, was not a totally new invention. A composite culture had been shared by common Hindus and Muslims in the times of the *Badshahs*.<sup>23</sup> What was needed was its reinvention in the light of current demands. The MMCP stalwarts therefore pioneered a number of initiatives in this regard, the most important being the effort to develop and popularize Hindustani. This was the language of the masses in north India, the meeting ground between Hindi and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> AICC Papers/ File G-68/1937.

<sup>21</sup> See K.M. Ashraf, *Firqa-parvar Siyasi Anjumanon ke kaam Karne ke Tariqay aur Hamara Farz, Hindustan* 29 August, 1937. Also see the essay by Z.A. Ahmad, ‘Congress aur Muslim Awam’, *Hindustan*, 26 September, 1937, for a similar argument.

<sup>22</sup> K.M. Ashraf, ‘Congress ki Shirkat aur Musalmanon ki Tehzeeb ka Sawal’, *Hindustan*, 5 September, 1937.

<sup>23</sup> ‘*Hamari Qaumi Zabaan*’, *Hindustan*, 15 August, 1937. The rhetoric of the MMCP stalwarts matched the new nationalist historiography being written in this period which stressed the composite Hindu-Muslim culture, namely the *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*, that began developing in north India during the medieval period. Ashraf’s own work, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, Delhi, 1959, reflected this trend.

Urdu.<sup>24</sup> The task at hand was to develop this language, right from its basic primer to its literary canon. The Progressive Writers Association primarily arose to meet the latter demand. The manifesto of the Association clearly stated that its aim was to produce literature which was concerned with the basic problems of the masses: hunger, poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. The declared task of literature was the arousal of critical spirit, and the examination of existing institutions and customs in the light of reason.<sup>25</sup> This clearly signalled the progressives' repudiation of older communal identities based on religion, and their espousal of new social identities grounded on rational class interests. As Rafi Ahmad Kidwai noted, Shaukat Ali and Jinnah needed to understand that they were not addressing the India of the 1920s. Old divisions were fast disappearing and were being replaced by class communities.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty in using the term 'Muslim' in the cultural sense was extended by Ashraf to the field of politics.<sup>27</sup> He argued that there was a fundamental contradiction between the so-called leaders of the Muslim community who were compradors allied to feudal and reactionary vested interests, and the Muslim workers and peasants who were opposed to these interests. As Ashraf noted, 'I do not subscribe to the belief that Musalmans can be united on the basis of a common political belief. Politics is essentially dictated by class interests and every effort to obscure class differentiation will result in the suppression of class elements.'<sup>28</sup> Pointedly referring to the ML, he declared that its leaders had not played a progressive role and that it was evident as to which side they would take during the new round of mass struggle.<sup>29</sup> He observed that the ML leadership had a 'false' view of politics. They had led Muslims to believe 'through poetry, false history, and through many other such influences' that they could on their own, achieve freedom for India besides building up a strong

<sup>24</sup> Sajjad Zaheer, Congress *Ki Wazartein, Hindustan*, 8 August, 1937.

<sup>25</sup> Hafiz Malik, 'The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 26, No. 4, 1967, pp. 649–664; Shabana Mahmud, 'Angare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers Association', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 30, No. 2, May 1996, pp. 447–467.

<sup>26</sup> *The Pioneer*, 23 April, 1937.

<sup>27</sup> *Searchlight*, 27 April, 1937, in AICC Papers/File G-18 (iii)/1937. See also K.M. Ashraf, Congress *ki Shirkat se Kya Murad Hai, Hindustan*, 2 August 1938, for a similar argument.

<sup>28</sup> Ashraf to Habib Hassan, 15 July 1938, AICC Papers/ File G-68/1937–38.

<sup>29</sup> K.M. Ashraf, 'Muslim League *ki Siyasi Ahmiyat aur Hamara Tariqeqar*', *Hindustan*, 17 September 1938. See also 'Hamara Kaam', *Hindustan*, 20 February, 1938.

and disciplined community. These two objectives, Ashraf fervently believed, could only be achieved by their joining the Congress. In doing so, the Muslims would be uniting with

forces dictated by the logic of history. This does not mean that we should subscribe to all backward elements within the Congress or the antiquated ideology which was once helpful to our progress. Those outside the Congress do not know what a keen struggle goes on amongst the elements inside the Congress.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, Ashraf sought to calm Muslim fears about the Congress being a Hindu organization. He declared that the dominant impression of the Congress as being dominated by a Hindu mentality was due to the presence in the party of a capitalist class, whose mentality was indeed communal. It was this class which brought discredit to the Congress as a whole and gave it the appearance of a Hindu organization.<sup>31</sup> The Congress could be purged of its Hindu and reactionary outlook only with the advent of radicalized Muslim masses into its fold. Along with their Hindu counterparts already in the Congress, they could take over the party organization and overthrow the rule of capitalists, reactionaries and right wingers. Such a move would also destroy Muslim reactionary leadership, which had arrogated to itself the leadership of the Muslim *Qaum*. The resulting political revolution would bring an end to old-style politics of pacts and agreements between self-styled leaders of religious communities geared towards dividing the spoils of office.

Ashraf therefore appealed to the Muslim masses to join the Congress in large numbers on the side of the progressives.<sup>32</sup> Their participation in its activities would alter the priorities of the Congress in the right direction and also provide the right channel for their revolutionary energies, as it had during the Khilafat Movement. Furthermore, it would give the Muslim masses a better leverage in negotiating safeguards for religious and cultural rights. The MMCP was thus not simply a programme to attract the Muslim masses into

<sup>30</sup> Ashraf to Habib Hassan, 15 July, 1938, AICC Papers/ File G-68/1937–38.

<sup>31</sup> See K.M. Ashraf, 'Congress *Mein Musalmanon ki Shirkat aur Hindu Zahniyat ka Sawaal*', *Hindustan*, 12 September, 1937. Ashraf here also appealed for the Congress to delink itself from *achhutoddhar* and other similar Hindu social reform activities and to remain a purely political anti-imperialist organization in order to remove the impression from Muslim minds that Congress was a Hindu organization.

<sup>32</sup> K.M. Ashraf, 'Congress *ki Shirkat se Kya Murad Hai*', *Hindustan*, 28 August, 1938.

the Congress but was an attempt to change the very face of Indian politics by anchoring it in a new socialist, secular foundation.

### **The ML's Response to the Congress Challenge**

The MMCP was a frontal attack upon the ML, since Nehru had characterized it as 'a group of Muslims, no doubt highly estimable persons, but functioning in the higher regions of the upper middle classes and having no contacts with Muslim masses and few even with the Muslim lower middle class'.<sup>33</sup> Jinnah himself was castigated as an 'elitist' and a 'reactionary' by the organizers of the UP Muslim Congressmen Conference that met in Allahabad in March 1937.<sup>34</sup> An alarmed Sir Muhammad Iqbal, pleaded with Jinnah to summon an all-India Muslim convention to take on Nehru's challenge.

To this convention you must re-state as clearly and as strongly as possible, the political objective of Indian Muslims as a distinct political unit in the country. It is absolutely necessary to tell the world both inside and outside India that the economic problem is not the only problem in the country. From the Muslim point of view the cultural problem is of much greater consequence to most Indian Muslims. At any rate it is not less important than the economic problem.<sup>35</sup>

Jinnah issued a warning to the Muslims: 'Do not be led away by the cries of Hunger and *Dal Bhat*. You must remember that nobody in the world can solve the fundamental economic, financial and social problems of a country overnight.'<sup>36</sup> He appealed to the Muslims instead to join the ML 'and make it a strong and really representative parliament of Muslim India, a body that may speak with unchallenged authority on behalf of the 80 million Muslims of this subcontinent'.<sup>37</sup>

The AIML urgently instituted a series of changes in its organizational structure, declared goals, and ideology in order to meet the Congress challenge. The charge was led by the UP men. A committee was set up under the Chairmanship of Nawab Ismail Khan to devise a new organizational blueprint with the intent of

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> 'Has Mr. Jinnah ever identified with the sufferings of the Mussalmans? Some of us have concluded that Mr Jinnah and his compeers are made of totally alien stuff which has nothing in common with the masses.' AICC Papers/File 12/1937.

<sup>35</sup> *Towards Freedom*, Vol. 1, p. 261.

<sup>36</sup> *Star of India*, 4 January, 1937.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

remaking the ML into a mass-based party.<sup>38</sup> Here the committee borrowed several leaves from the Congress book. Under the new party constitution, Town and Tehsil Leagues were designated as the primary units of the ML organization. These units would elect District Leagues which in turn would elect provincial Leagues. The provincial Leagues were to elect the Council of the AIML besides sending nominations for the election of the party President. A significant recommendation called for abolishing the position of permanent President in order to underline the ML's new democratic culture. The party membership fee was now fixed at two annas, below the Congress party fee of four annas as part of this new drive to shed the ML's image as an organization of Nawabs and landlords. The committee also suggested revisions to the constitution of the ML to bolster its anti-imperialist credentials. The ML's declared goal now was the 'attainment of the status of a free and independent country for India by all legitimate means with a democratic form of government in which the rights and interests of the Musalmans were protected by adequate and effective constitutional safeguards'.<sup>39</sup> With these changes in its party structure and declared goals, the ML now appeared no less radical or anti-imperialist than the Congress.

In the UP itself, the UPML next chalked out an ambitious plan of mass contact. At the suggestion of Khaliqzaman, it was decided that all the 27 ML members of the UP Legislative Assembly would raise Rs 100 each from their respective constituencies while each provincial working committee member would contribute Rs. 30 over the next three months for carrying out propaganda among the Muslim masses.<sup>40</sup> Another committee was set up with the ambitious task of enrolling 25% of the adult Muslim population in UP as ML members over the next three months.<sup>41</sup>

The UPML began its propaganda offensive against the MMCP by bitterly criticizing it as an attempt to break the solidarity of the Muslim community, using the strength of the Congress organization, its financial muscle, and significant backing by its provincial governments. In contrast, it pointed out that the Congress had made extensive efforts to preserve the solidarity of the Hindu community during the crisis created by the Communal Award a few years earlier. Gandhi's

<sup>38</sup> *The Pioneer*, 7 May 1937.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> AICC Papers, File 16/1937.

<sup>41</sup> *Towards Freedom*, vol.1, p. 492.

fast unto death and the subsequent Poona Pact with Ambedkar, were pointedly referred to by Nawab Ismail Khan, the UPML President, in his exchange with Nehru:

It will be recollected that when separate electorates were provided for the untouchables at their own request, the Hindu leaders were most vehement in their denunciation of the Muslim attitude towards the question. They were charged with breaking up the solidarity of the Hindu community. Muslims entertain similar resentment against the Congress leaders today for launching the mass contact movement.<sup>42</sup>

Next, the leading protagonists of the MMCP were vituperated by the ML. Ashraf was labeled as a godless communist and a traitor. The ML's line of attack had a telling effect. Ashraf's notoriety can be gauged from the fact that local Congress units fighting by-elections for Muslim seats soon beseeched the high command not to send him for electioneering, given his unpopularity in the Muslim constituencies.<sup>43</sup> A debate at the AMU's students union between Ashraf and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, editor of the *Zamindar* newspaper, ended in *fisticuffs*, in which Ashraf was assaulted.<sup>44</sup>

However, it is the ideological response to the MMCP that proved to be the most potent weapon in the UPML's armoury. One of the prominent campaigners for the ML in the UP was the Raja of Mahmudabad<sup>45</sup> who decried the Congress party's refusal to recognize the existence of the Muslim community and to work with its accredited leaders for 'national advancement'. As he noted, 'We have over and over again assured our fellow countrymen that in any fight for freedom

<sup>42</sup> Ismail Khan to Nehru, 16 January 1938 in SAI Tirmizi (ed.), *Paradoxes of Partition*, 1937–39, Delhi, 1998, p. 320.

<sup>43</sup> See the memoir of Muzaffar Husain, *Meri Siyasi Sarguzasth*, Lucknow, 1983. Husain worked actively in the election campaign of Nisar Sherwani, the Congress candidate in the Jhansi by-election, which was won by the ML in June 1937. Also AICC Papers, File 38/1937, Letter from A.B. Abbasi to Congress office. 'Dr. Ashraf has his religious unpopularity against him. Could he assure his co-religionists to be a true Musalman?'

<sup>44</sup> *Madina*, 13 November, 1937.

<sup>45</sup> Mahmudabad was one of UP's most prominent landlords. He was the youngest member of the ML's central working committee, its National Treasurer as well as the chief organizer of the Muslim League National Guard set up to defend Muslim lives and property. He was also the chief patron of the All India Muslim Students Federation (AIMSF) formed by Muslim students who had broken away from the All India Students federation (AISF). His Kaiserbagh palace was the virtual headquarters of the UPML. Even though he belonged to the landed aristocracy, Mahmudabad cultivated an austere personal style. He wore khaddar, was known for his generosity towards his tenants and his piety as a practicing Shia.

we are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with them but we do not wish to lose our identity as Muslims. Warning Muslims to ‘counteract efforts made in interested quarters to divide the community amongst themselves’, he offered Islam as a total ideology which had answers to all the problems of modern society.<sup>46</sup> For Mahmudabad, Islam was the greatest emancipatory creed the world had ever known. Muslims were deeply desirous of political liberty because their ‘religion teaches them liberty without which they cannot truly live.’<sup>47</sup> Islam was also socially emancipatory since it sought to break down the barriers of class, color and race. All Muslims, whether belonging to the masses or to the higher classes, were brothers.<sup>48</sup> However, Mahmudabad declared that Muslims wanted liberty not only for the country but also for their own community and therefore outlined the ML’s programme for the Muslims.

If the MMCP offered the Muslim masses a fully-fledged socialist programme, Mahmudabad offered them a vision of Islamic socialism.<sup>49</sup> He asserted that the Prophet had in fact inaugurated the oldest socialist creed in the world 1300 years ago. The Prophet had been an orphan and a poor ‘commission agent’. He also knew that the majority in the world was poor and Islam was thus quintessentially, the religion of the poor. The socialism that the Prophet inaugurated through Islam, aimed to reduce social disparities and ensure that every individual had a comfortable existence.<sup>50</sup> Mahmudabad further argued that the current disparities between rich and poor were due to the greed of capitalists, who had denigrated the message of Islam to such an extent that time had come for a *jihad* against poverty. Stalin too, Mahmudabad remarked, was compelled to take the path of socialism that Islam had inaugurated. However, there was a fundamental difference between socialism and Islam. While Islam was based on *ijtima*, socialism was not based on any such popular consent

<sup>46</sup> Speech at Arrah reported in *Asar-i-Jadid*, 18 April 1939, in Syed Ishtiaq Husain (ed.), *Khutbat-i-Raja Sahab Mahmudabad: Raja Sahab Mahmudabad Mohammad Amir Ahmad Khan ke Khutbat, Irshadat, Interviews aur Chand Aham Dastavezat ka Majmua*, Karachi, 1997.

<sup>47</sup> *The Leader*, 18 October, 1937.

<sup>48</sup> *Asar-i-Jadid*, 18 April 1939, in *Khutbat-i-Raja Sahab Mahmudabad*, Karachi, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Mahmudabad’s speech at the Bombay Provincial Muslim League Conference reported in *Asar-i-Jadid* 13 January 1938 in *Khutbat-i-Raja Sahab Mahmudabad*, Karachi, 1997.

<sup>50</sup> Mahmudabad’s views were echoed by some of his colleagues in the UPML. Khaliquzzaman, in a speech at the Kanpur District Political Conference, noted that the Muslims had no need for a special socialist programme since the *Holy Quran* embodied all the principles of socialism. See *Madina*, 21 August, 1938.

of the community. But more importantly, socialism was a result of mere intellectual enquiry and had nothing to do with the heart. Islam however represented both the heart and the mind and hence it would be enduring.<sup>51</sup> An ML supporter summed up the critique of Congress socialism by remarking that when the slogan, 'Workers of the world unite was raised, nobody has a problem. However when the slogan Muslims of the world unite, was raised, everybody has a problem!'<sup>52</sup>

Mahmudabad was the main mover of the socio-economic resolution of the ML at the 1937 Lucknow ML session. The resolution was progressive and far-reaching. For the industrial labour force it sought minimum wages, regulated work hours, and hygienic housing conditions. It also favoured state assistance for cottage and small-scale industries. The resolution's stance against 'Hindu capitalists' was evident from the plea for the establishment of an industrial development board for the development of industries and elimination of middlemen.<sup>53</sup> For the peasants it sought reduction of rural and urban debt, abolition of usury, security of tenure, fixation of fair rents, and abolition of forced labour. Mahmudabad also borrowed a leaf from Gandhian constructive programs, advising Muslims to wear *garha* cloth woven by Muslim weavers<sup>54</sup>, enforce picketing of liquor and toddy shops<sup>55</sup>, and join the Muslim League National Guard to participate in social work among the Muslim masses<sup>56</sup>.

The contrasting fortunes of the Congress and of the ML, and the fate of their respective campaigns to mobilize Muslim support, were reflected in a series of by-elections that were held for Muslim constituencies in the UP during 1937 and 1938. The first election in Bahraich was won unopposed by Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, the Congress candidate, as the UPML refused to put up a candidate against him.<sup>57</sup> The next election was held in the shadow of the Congress party's MMCP, for the Orai-Jhansi-Hamirpur Muslim rural seat in

<sup>51</sup> See Mahmudabad's later essay 'Pakistan *ki Taarif*', *Sidq*, 11 May, 1941.

<sup>52</sup> *Zulqarnain*, 28 July, 1938.

<sup>53</sup> *The Leader*, 21 October, 1937.

<sup>54</sup> PAI for the week ending 3 September, 1938.

<sup>55</sup> PAI for the week ending 14 May, 1938.

<sup>56</sup> *The Leader*, 18 August, 1938.

<sup>57</sup> This was done against the wishes of Jinnah who wanted to put up an ML candidate but was thwarted by the Khaliqzaman group. This election took place before the collapse of negotiations between the Congress and this group on ministry-making in July, 1937. Jinnah, in his talks with the Jamiat ul ulema-i- Hind leaders, in fact threatened to resign from the Presidentship of the ML if the party did not put up a candidate in Bahraich. See *Leader*, 30 March, 1937.



Bundelkhand, and saw a bitter fight between the Congress and the ML. Here the ML candidate emerged victorious. The Congress defeat however did not dishearten Nehru since the Congress did creditably, leading in two rural segments of the constituency, with the ML taking the lone, more densely-populated, urban segment.<sup>58</sup> It only strengthened Nehru's belief that the MMCP was working among the masses in the rural areas.

The next election at Bijnor was a crucial contest. It was held against the backdrop of the assumption of power by a Congress ministry in Lucknow and a full blooded attempt through the MMCP to mobilize the Muslims outside the legislature. The contest would decide the fate of Hafiz Mohammad Ibrahim, the ML 'renegade', who had resigned from the seat that he had won on a ML ticket a few months earlier. Ibrahim was seeking re-election on a Congress ticket after becoming a minister in the government. The election was seen as a test of which way the wind was blowing, and this time the Congress won hands down. The result led to an even greater bitterness between the two sides as the ML accused Congress of using official machinery to put pressure on the voters. The decisive victory also sent shockwaves through ML circles.<sup>59</sup> Ibrahim's ML opponent in the Bijnor by-election resigned his party membership and became a four-anna member of the Congress.<sup>60</sup> A triumphant Nehru reported the decisive victory to the AICC session in Calcutta as signaling the gathering of all anti-colonial forces under the Congress banner. With the rubber tied at 1–1, Congress and ML workers began fanning into Moradabad, Saharanpur and Bulandshahr for the next three by-elections. These were decisively won by the ML and came as a serious blow to the Congress. The losses were particularly unsettling for the Congress since all three by-elections had been held in Muslim rural constituencies in which the Muslims were believed to be sympathetic to the Congress, in contrast to the urban areas, which were widely seen as ML strongholds. Nehru himself

<sup>58</sup> The Congress got a majority of votes in the rural pockets of Orai and Jhansi but lost heavily in the urban Hamirpur segment. See Nehru's statement to the press, AICC Papers/ File G-61/1937.

<sup>59</sup> See Rao Hamid Ali Khan to Jinnah, in Mukhtar Masood (ed.), *Eyewitnesses of History: A Collection of Letters Addressed to Quaid e Azam*, Karachi, 1968, pp. 95–6. 'The defeat at Bijnaur has spread a very bad effect among the Muslims all over the country and particularly in the neighbouring districts. In my own village where the majority is of Muslims, are thinking of where to go [sic].' Also see Shafaat Ahmad Khan to Jinnah, pp. 70–72.

<sup>60</sup> *The Leader*, 18 November, 1937.

campaigned intensively in all these constituencies during the by-elections. The campaign on the ML side was carried out by leaders such as the Shaukat Ali, Mahmudabad, Nawab Ismail Khan as well as a number of local ML functionaries in the districts, though Jinnah himself did not campaign in a single by-election.

The ML as an organization registered an impressive growth in the UP following these election victories. By January 1938, it had 300,000 Muslim members on its rolls compared with the 100,000 Muslims registered as Congress members.<sup>61</sup> An emboldened ML now initiated a blistering attack on the policies of the Congress government. Protests were launched against Gandhi's Wardha scheme of education, Vande Mataram as the national song, the tricolor as the national flag, and the UP government's alleged support for Hindi over Urdu. The UPML also rallied Muslims over the Palestine issue as well as the Arya Samaj's Hyderabad agitation<sup>62</sup>. The Pant government was assailed for the increase in the incidence of communal riots and the UPML hammered home the point that Muslim lives and property were in greater danger than ever before since the government was partial to the Hindus.<sup>63</sup> The ML also mounted a legal defence of Muslims arrested in cases of communal rioting in different parts of the UP.<sup>64</sup> Finally, the Congress was criticized as a 'toady' of the Raj, given the close co-operation between Congress governments and the Governors in the provinces.

By the middle of September 1938, the Congress party's MMCP had virtually collapsed and the programme's office at party headquarters was formally shut down.<sup>65</sup> The MMCP stalwarts who had valiantly opposed the ML were now anxious for talks leading to a settlement.<sup>66</sup> The ML had finally emerged as the dominant voice of the Muslim

<sup>61</sup> *Madina*, 21 January, 1938.

<sup>62</sup> The Arya Samaj agitation was against the Nizam of Hyderabad for his alleged denial of religious rights to his Hindu subjects. See PAI for the week ending 24 June, 1939.

<sup>63</sup> PAI for the week ending 2 April, 1938.

<sup>64</sup> PAI for the week ending 19 March, 1938.

<sup>65</sup> K.M. Ashraf to Nehru, 2 September, 1938, in Basudev Chatterji (ed.), *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1938*, Part I, Delhi, 1999, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> These were first opened with Shaukat Ali, the old Khilafatist, in 1938. The Congress left wing turned to Jinnah himself in the following year. See Liaquat Ali Khan's letter to Jinnah, 16 June 1939 in Muhammad Reza Qasimi (ed.), *Liaquat-Jinnah Correspondence*, Karachi, 2003. Liaquat wrote to Jinnah that Sajjad Zaheer, Mian Iftikharuddin, Dr Hussain Zaheer met him to say that the left wing was anxious for a settlement with the League and was willing to force the High Command to acknowledge the ML as the representative organization of the Muslims if the ML

community in the UP.<sup>67</sup> But just when it appeared that the ML was sitting pretty, the solidity of the party's support-base was seriously called into question in the ensuing *Madhe Sahaba* agitation. This agitation became a troublesome issue by the autumn of 1938 in Lucknow, but assumed ominous proportions by the summer of 1939, as rioting between Shias and Sunnis spread from the capital to other parts of the UP. The problem threatened to assume all-India proportions as it began to drag in partisans from all over India.

### **The *Madhe Sahaba* Agitation and the Limits of the Muslim League's Political Mobilization**

The problem between the Lucknow Shias and Sunnis began in 1905 over annual *Tazia* processions during *Muharram* to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala.<sup>68</sup> Till that year, Shias and Sunnis went together in common processions, taking their *Tazias* to one main 'Karbala' in a place called Talkatora, where they were buried. Over the next few years temporary fairs sprang up in the areas adjoining the road to the 'Karbala' on the three main days of the *Tazia* processions, namely, *Ashra* or the tenth day of *Muharram* and the anniversary of Karbala; *Chhelum* or the fortieth day thereafter; and the 21<sup>st</sup> day of *Ramzan*, the anniversary of Imam Ali's birth. As the Government's *Gazette* noted about these fairs, 'Shops and booths came to be set up and there were amusements such as swings and merry go rounds. It appears further that women of the town had begun not only to frequent the route of the *tazias* but to set up tents on the fairground where they received visitors.'<sup>69</sup>

The Shias took exception to these practices which they felt denigrated the solemnity of these religious occasions which were predominantly for mourning. They therefore petitioned the Lucknow District Magistrate to check these practices and to disallow anything which went against the character of these occasions. In response,

could give them a face saver. They also stated that the Hindus in the left wing were fully with them in this regard.

<sup>67</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, Haig Papers, 10 April, 1939.

<sup>68</sup> *Government Gazette of the United Provinces Published by Authority Extraordinary*, Lucknow, Monday, 28 March 1938. Government of the UP General Administration Department, pp. 2–6. The following background to the problem is based on this *Gazette*. File 113/1939 (Public Information), UP State Archives, Lucknow.

<sup>69</sup> *Gazette Extraordinary*, p. 3.

stringent rules sympathetic to Shia demands were put into place for the *Ashra* procession of 1906 by the Lucknow District administration. The Sunnis objected to the new rules claiming that unlike the Shias, they regarded the processions as celebrations in honour of an Islamic hero and not as occasions for mourning. The dispute between the two sides was temporarily settled in 1906 with the Lucknow district administration granting a separate site for Sunnis to bury their Karbala.

The Sunnis however were now determined to give their processions a character that was distinct to that of the Shia processions. Verses at the time known as *Charyari* were recited during the Sunni processions. These verses were in praise of the first four Caliphs who were portrayed as friends of the Prophet as well as friends of each other. Since some of these verses 'were positively objectionable in that they contained abuse of Shias and of their beliefs', their recitation was found provocative by the Shias.<sup>70</sup> The Shias retaliated by reciting *Tabarra* or abuse of the first three Caliphs in their own processions, since they saw them as usurpers who were hostile to the rightful Caliph Ali and his family. These developments marked a watershed in the social relations between these two sects of Islam in the UP. Serious riots broke out in 1907 and 1908 in Lucknow due to the recitation of *Charyari* and *Tabarra* by Sunni and Shia processions respectively.

Responding to these developments, in 1908, the provincial government set up a committee headed by T.C. Piggott, an ICS officer, who was asked to examine the whole issue, assess the claims of both parties, and to make recommendations. The Piggott committee concluded that the recitation of *Charyari* verses in an organized way, and converting *Tazia* processions into *Charyari* processions, was an 'innovation' since 1906. Such social innovations were deemed to be at the root of civil disturbances in a combustible religious society like India, and the British, in their keenness to maintain law and order, actively discouraged them. Not surprisingly, the Piggott committee recommended prohibiting the recitation of *Charyari* verses along the 'route of any *tazia*, *alam* or other Mohammadan procession or in the hearing of such a procession' on three days of the year—*Ashra*, *Chhelum* and the 21<sup>st</sup> day of *Ramzan*.

On the question of the utterance of these verses on other days of the year, it was decided to leave the matter to 'the operations of ordinary

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

law'. This meant that deliberately offensive recitations of *Charyari* verses by individuals could still be punished by the law at all times of the year. However, an absolute ban on *Charyari* was not imposed, as the Sunnis were deemed to possess the right to express the 'distinguishing doctrines of their faith'. Thus, Sunnis could be granted permission to utter these verses under strict regulation in a circumscribed area on particular days of the year so as not to offend the Shias or cause a law and order problem. The Shia plea that the recitation of these verses be banned throughout the year was disallowed.

In addition, the committee also made a distinction between *Charyari* and *Tabarra* and declared that they could not be placed on the same footing. It adjudicated that while *Charyari* primarily involved praise of the companions of the Prophet, *Tabarra* primarily involved abuse against the first three Caliphs, with the intent of hurting Sunni religious sensibilities. The recitation of *Tabarra* was therefore deemed unlawful at all times of the year under any conditions. The Piggott committee thus sought to balance the claims of both the communities, but not surprisingly, it succeeded in pleasing neither of them.

The Sunnis were the first to express their dissatisfaction with these recommendations, which, they claimed, curtailed their freedom to express their fundamental religious beliefs. They decided to confront the government after it accepted the recommendations of the Piggott committee. Thus, in 1909, Sunnis deliberately flouted government orders disallowing *Charyari* during *Muharram* which led to arrests and prosecution. The chastened Lucknow Sunnis now decided to take the lawful route. In 1911, they applied to the Deputy Commissioner of Lucknow for permission to take out a *Charyari* procession which was denied as it was feared that it could lead to riots. A second application was made in 1912 to the Lieutenant Governor, Sir James Meston, but this too ended in failure. Orders were henceforth issued every year as a matter of routine by the government, disallowing public recitation of *Charyari* in any organized manner. The Sunnis therefore desisted from taking out any *Charyari* processions.

The problem broke out with renewed vigour in 1936 on *Ashra* day when two Sunnis disobeyed orders and publicly recited *Charyari* in the city centre of Lucknow. They were arrested and prosecuted, but then on *Chhelum* day more Sunnis took part in reciting *Charyari* and fourteen were arrested. This led to a new agitation by the Lucknow Sunnis in favour of reciting these verses publicly, which came to be known as *Madhe Sahaba* (Praises of the Companions of the Prophet). The Sunnis now proposed to take out a procession on *Barawafat*, the Prophet's

birthday on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1936 during which *Madhe Sahaba* verses would be recited. This was prohibited by the Lucknow Police Commissioner in anticipation of violence. The Sunnis however had a procession without permission on 12 June 1936, reciting verses from the *Quran* containing praises of the companions of the Prophet without any reference to their names.

This led Shias to believe that *Madhe Sahaba* had been recited and they retaliated by publicly reciting *Tabarra*. The Sunnis deepened the conflict by taking out processions every Friday reciting *Madhe Sahaba* in deliberate defiance of official orders prohibiting such processions. A spate of arrests and prosecutions followed leading to a considerable law and order problem in Lucknow over the next few months. Towards the winter of 1936, both sides turned to the government to resolve the dispute by presenting memorials and making their respective cases on the issue, and a series of negotiations ensued between the three parties. These negotiations however failed to break the deadlock and the government therefore appointed yet another committee, headed by Justice Allsop of the Allahabad High Court, to review the situation.

The Allsop committee, which began its proceedings in April 1937, was asked to decide upon two questions. First, whether the principles and policy laid down in the Government Resolution of 7<sup>th</sup> January 1909 following the Piggott committee report, required any modification, and second, whether the practices adopted by the Lucknow district administration, *vis-à-vis* the Sunnis, for maintaining law and order needed to be changed. The Allsop committee submitted its report to the government by June 1937 and endorsed the recommendations of the Piggott committee to maintain the status quo.

This could hardly be expected to assuage the Sunnis, and the government, reluctant to offend the majority in the Muslim community, accordingly delayed the publication of the Allsop report. Instead, it sought to bring about a compromise between Shias and Sunnis through the mediation of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.<sup>71</sup> However, with these negotiations not making much headway, and with the Sunnis threatening an agitation for the publication of the report, the government finally published it in March 1938, along with a resolution accepting the report's findings.

The Sunni response, as expected, was an outright rejection of the decisions of the Allsop committee and condemnation of the

<sup>71</sup> Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1938, File 18/1/37 Home Poll, NAI, New Delhi.

resolution of the government. Maulana Zafarul Mulk and Maulana Abdul Shakur, the two main leaders of the *Madhe Sahaba* movement, told a public meeting in Lucknow in late April 1938 that a meeting of 26 eminent *ulema* had decided that recitation of *Madhe Sahaba* could not be restricted for even a single day since it was a fundamental religious right. Zafarul Mulk declared that he had sent a notice to the government that the Sunnis would launch civil disobedience in case it did not reconsider its decision. The next day on *Chhelum*, there was an incident at Patanala, a narrow lane in Lucknow, housing the *Dar al Muballaghin*, a Sunni religious institution run by Maulana Abdul Shakur. Brickbats were thrown at a Shia *Tazia* procession passing in front of the institution and the consequent riot saw ten people being killed and several dozen injured.

The government arrested Abdul Shakur and Zafarul Mulk in order to control the situation, but this outraged Sunnis in other parts of the UP as the issue began to spill out of the confines of Lucknow. Shops were shut for two full days in Lucknow, big public meetings were held in Barabanki, Bareilly, Bahraich, Faizabad, Bijnor, Saharanpur, Ghazipur, Agra and Azamgarh, and a general strike was observed in Sultanpur district.<sup>72</sup> The two Maulanas were subsequently released by the government as it issued fresh invitations to both parties to attend negotiations. The next several months however saw a buildup in tension as both Shias and Sunnis prepared for a showdown. On the Sunni side, the *Anjuman Tahaffuz-e-Namus Sahaba* was formed to co-ordinate civil disobedience. On the Shia side, the *Anjuman Tanzimul Momineen* emerged as the premier organization, along with a *Fauj Abbasia*, or volunteer corps, for self-defence.

### The Muslim League Dilemma

The ML saw the Shia-Sunni schism as a serious threat since it undermined the idea that the Muslims were an undivided, religious and political community. But what was particularly embarrassing for the ML was the fact that partisans on both sides of the conflict were beyond its control, thus bringing into question the party's claim to being 'the authoritative and sole representative organization of the Muslims'. Furthermore, the ML faced the prospect of splintering on

<sup>72</sup> PAI for the week ending 30 April, 1938.

this issue as district units in the UP began to manifest splits along Shia-Sunni lines.<sup>73</sup> The ML's problems were compounded by the fact that while the Sunnis comprised the overwhelming majority of the UP Muslims, the leadership had a number of Shia landlords in important leadership positions such as the Raja of Mahmudabad, the Raja of Salempur, and the Raja of Pirpur. Jinnah himself was a Shia. The ML initially decided to maintain a policy of strict neutrality on the *Madhe Sahaba* issue, like the Congress had done in the case of the Communal Award, but this failed to please either group. It therefore changed tack and started to make specific initiatives towards both sects to stem the alarming breakdown of Muslim unity and to recoup its own political base.

### The Muslim League and the Shias

The Shias were hostile towards the ML since they saw its neutrality on the issue as a sign of its Sunni sympathies. The Shias bluntly accused the party of hypocrisy on minority issues. As Nawab S.M. Ismail, a Shia ML member of the Legislative Council from the neighbouring state of Bihar, wrote to Jinnah, 'The AIML who [sic] speaks in the name of the minority [Muslim] community and also speaks of the tyranny of the Hindu majority ought with its naked eyes to see and to realize the tyranny of the Muslim majority over the Muslim minority.'<sup>74</sup> Ismail further reminded Jinnah, that as a Shia himself, he needed to protect the religious rights of his brethren.

The *Anjuman Tanzimul Momineen*, the main Shia organization formed under the guidance of Shia *mujtahids*, therefore condemned the ML as a Sunni organization<sup>75</sup> and asked Shias to join the Congress.<sup>76</sup> The *Anjuman's* executive committee passed a further resolution denying the ML's right to represent Shias and stated that any ML-Government agreement over *Madhe Sahaba* would not be binding on them.<sup>77</sup> The *Anjuman* also reached out for Hindu support by expressing itself in

<sup>73</sup> See PAI for the week ending 3 September, 1938 for its report on Rae Bareilly.

<sup>74</sup> S.M. Ismail to Jinnah, 10 April, 1939, *Qaid-i-Azam Papers*, Reel 14, File 161 *Madhe Sahaba*, April–July, 1939, Neg 10773, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London. (Henceforth, QA Papers, OIOC).

<sup>75</sup> PAI for the week ending 28 May, 1938.

<sup>76</sup> PAI for the week ending 24 September, 1938.

<sup>77</sup> PAI for the week ending 18 March, 1939.



favour of cow protection.<sup>78</sup> Hindu presence in Shia mosques became a regular feature and in Kanpur the Shias circulated a pamphlet entitled ‘*What is Tabarra*’, among the Hindus.<sup>79</sup> Finally, in what was a humiliating slap on the face for the ML, a deputation of Shia leaders made a trip to Wardha to petition Gandhi on the matter. Not only was the ML’s position as the authoritative organization of the Muslims being challenged, but also the Congress was being approached as a forum for appeal by one of the parties in the conflict.

The ML attempted to assuage an angry Shia community with a range of strategies. It first approached the Shias through the issue of Palestine, hoping to tap into the rich vein of sentiment for fellow oppressed Muslims in the wider Islamic world which had paid handsome dividends during the Khilafat agitation. The *Anjuman Tanzimul Momineen* was therefore persuaded by the ML to participate in its Palestine Day processions on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1938. On this occasion the Shia band joining the ML procession in Lucknow comprised 400 men carrying *lathis* and another fifty volunteers of the *Fauj Abbasia* carrying dummy rifles.

This *Anjuman*’s participation in an ML-sponsored rally brought swift condemnation from within the Shia community. Critics contended that the Shias could not take part in such meetings or processions unless the ML promised to stand by and support them in their conflict with the Sunnis. To stanch the flow of criticism, the *Anjuman* responded by promising not to co-operate with the ML until the latter reformed its current policy, which was detrimental to Shia interests. The Shias were obviously placing a price on their support and forcing the ML to raise its bids.

The ML responded by withdrawing its candidate against Syed Ali Zaheer for the Allahabad-Jaunpur Muslim seat to the UP legislative Assembly in a by-election held in January 1939. This was on the grounds that he was a Shia and the ML wanted to make a concession to the Shia community. Syed Ali Zaheer’s sympathies with the Congress were well known. The son of Sir Wazir Hasan, a prominent Congress member, Zaheer had resigned from the ML soon after its Lucknow session in October 1937 after denouncing Jinnah for his ‘negative policy’ and the ML for its ‘anti-national’ position. Syed Ali Zaheer won the seat unopposed and went on to become a vocal defender of Shia rights as the agitation progressed, totally ignoring the ML.

<sup>78</sup> PAI for the week ending 25 June, 1938.

<sup>79</sup> PAI for the week ending 13 May, 1939.

The importance of the ML's gesture may be gauged from the fact that this was the first time the party had not contested a Muslim seat after the Congress had assumed office in the UP. Elections were occasions for the ML to bolster its credentials as the sole representative organization of the Muslims, and a concession of this kind was therefore the high price that it was willing to pay to avert a meltdown in UP Muslim politics.

### The Muslim League and the Sunnis

The greater threat for the ML arose from the fact that its Sunni flank was rendered vulnerable by the *Madhe Sahaba* movement. In the first place, the main Sunni leaders of the movement were independent and not amenable to the ML's control. Zafarul Mulk and Abdul Shakur were suspicious of ML's intentions, given the fact that Shias such as Mahmudabad, Salempur, and Pirpur were top ranking UP ML leaders. Thus, at a Sunni public meeting called by Zafarul Mulk and Abdul Shakur, the ML representative who got up to declare support for civil disobedience against the government orders prohibiting *Madhe Sahaba* processions, was heckled and told to sit down as 'nobody had faith in the ML on the matter'.<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, anti-ML Muslim political parties aligned with the Congress such as the Ahrar party became extremely active throughout 1938 and 1939, in trying to attract the Sunnis support. The Ahrars had considerable success in gaining adherents, especially in the Agra division of the UP. The Ahrars fished in troubled waters by hiring Kharijites to utter *Tabarra* against Imam Ali in many places. This led to a riot between Shias and Sunnis in Rae Bareilly.<sup>81</sup>

Thirdly, influential Sunni *ulema*, at the forefront of the *Madhe Sahaba* agitation, were firm supporters of the Congress. Thus, Hussain Ahmad Madni, Principal of the Deoband school and a prominent Congress supporter, declared that recitation of the *Madhe Sahaba* was a fundamental religious right and openly advised Sunnis to carry on a peaceful struggle till their demands were fully met.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the *ulema* of Firangi Mahal and Fargania, two important religious seminaries with ML sympathies, backed the movement by issuing a

<sup>80</sup> PAI for the week ending 23 April, 1938.

<sup>81</sup> PAI for the week ending 22 April, 1939.

<sup>82</sup> PAI for the week ending 4 March, 1939.

joint manifesto in which they stated that under no circumstances could the abuse of their Caliphs be tolerated and asked the government to stop any recitation of *Tabarra*.<sup>83</sup> What was perhaps more alarming for the ML was the fact that Zafarul Mulk had participated as a delegate at the AICC annual session at Haripura in 1938. Zafarul Mulk was also supposed to have spent a considerable amount of time with Gandhi at the Wardha Ashram.

Matters were made worse for the ML by the fact that Sunnis in Lucknow showed themselves to be as keen as the Shias to enlist Hindu sympathy. Thus, when a dead pig was found in Lucknow's Nadan Mahal mosque, the Sunnis claimed that this was not the work of the Hindus but an underhand Shia tactic in order to cause a Sunni-Hindu riot and weaken the *Madhe Sahaba* movement.<sup>84</sup> The ML's efforts to attract Sunnis to their camp in Lucknow were also rebuffed. Thus, when the party organized a meeting in Lucknow to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Caliph Omar, it was disrupted by hecklers in the crowd who accused it of being in 'cahoots' with the Shias, leading 'to some loss of prestige' for the ML among the local Sunnis.<sup>85</sup>

The ML sought to keep its Sunni base intact by stressing the need for Muslim unity. In this regard, it skillfully utilized issues affecting Muslims in their localities, along with issues impinging upon them at the provincial and national level, with some success. At ML meetings in Kanpur and Barabanki it was alleged that the Congress furtively stoked Shia Sunni riots in order to sow divisions within the *Qaum*, since the MMCP had failed.<sup>86</sup> In Muzaffarnagar, the lack of Muslims in the local Gram Sudhaar committee and dismissal of Muslim sub-inspectors for their participation in a strike, were cited as instances of government vindictiveness towards the Muslims.<sup>87</sup> In Kanpur it

<sup>83</sup> PAI for the week ending 15 April, 1939.

<sup>84</sup> PAI for the week ending 11 March, 1939.

<sup>85</sup> PAI for the week ending 18 February, 1939.

<sup>86</sup> PAI for the week ending 13 May and 10 June, 1939. This was a constant ML refrain and was possibly true to an extent as partners of the Congress such as the Jamiatul Ulama-i-Hind and the Ahrars tried to use the dispute to their own advantage. However, what must also be noted is that the prominent UP ML leader, Khaliqzaman, was widely rumoured to have stoked Shia Sunni tensions in 1936–37 in order to ensure his election victory. See Shafaat Ahmad Khan to Jinnah 18 May, 1939, *Madhe Sahaba* File, QA Papers. Shafaat wrote that 'the issue is entirely due to the machinations of the Congress though it must be confessed that in 1936, during the election campaign of Khaliqzaman sahib, the Sunni agitation was deliberately engineered by Khaliq against the Shia candidate and a Shia Sunni riot in May or June was the consequence'.

<sup>87</sup> PAI for the week ending 4 June, 1938.

was alleged that Hindus were aiming to setup Ram Raj and treat Muslims as 'worse than Untouchables'.<sup>88</sup> At Badayun, the ML alleged that Sampurnanand, the Education Minister, had declared Sanskrit as India's national language.<sup>89</sup> At Fatehpur, local ML members accused the local District Board of financing Hindu schools to the exclusion of Muslim institutions. It was also alleged that Muslim boys had been prohibited from saying their prayers at the Government School.<sup>90</sup> In Benares, Gandhi's charkha and khadi were portrayed as having thrown 'four and half crore Muslim weavers out of work'.<sup>91</sup> The ML organized memorials all over the UP on the first anniversary of Tanda firings by the police to avert a communal riot, in which several Muslims were killed.<sup>92</sup> The ML also criticized the Congress' Tenancy Bill in the legislature alleging that the contemplated changes would affect Muslim *Warasat* law. It declared that Muslims could never accept the Tenancy Bill as it was based on Hindu law. On the issue of Palestine, the ML alleged that the British government and the Congress had entered a conspiracy according to which the British government would give Congress a free hand to oppress the Indian Muslims, if it did not interfere with British repression of the Palestinian Arabs.<sup>93</sup> Schemes for Pakistan were also commended by ML speakers in a few places.<sup>94</sup> Finally, the ML continued its relentless campaign against the Congress on the familiar issues of communal riots in UP, the threat to Muslim lives and property, *Vande Mataram*, the Wardha scheme of education, and discrimination against Urdu.

In spite of this vigorous campaign there appears to have been a slight dip in the enthusiasm for the ML among the UP Muslims, as the party's annual session held in December 1938 at Patna failed to evoke much response in the UP. As Sir Harry Haig, the UP Governor wrote to the Viceroy,

Perhaps I have overestimated the importance of the speeches and resolutions of the Muslim League conference at Patna. During my tours in the eastern districts, I questioned a number of District Officers and Superintendents of Police as to whether this conference had any effect on the communal

<sup>88</sup> PAI for the week ending 24 June, 1939.

<sup>89</sup> PAI for the week ending 24 September, 1938.

<sup>90</sup> PAI for the week ending 1 October, 1938.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> PAI for the week ending 17 September, 1938.

<sup>93</sup> PAI for the week ending 15 April, 1939.

<sup>94</sup> PAI for the week ending 15 April, 1939.

situation. They all told me it had not, and in this part of the province at any rate they do not seem apprehensive about trouble at Bakrid.<sup>95</sup>

### The Crescendo of the *Madhe Sahaba* Movement

The Shia-Sunni tensions peaked in the spring of 1939 as Sunnis piled pressure on the government for permission to recite *Madhe Sahaba* during *Muharram*. They were incensed that even though the right to publicly recite *Madhe Sahaba* had been acknowledged by the government through two official communiqués, permission had been withheld on the grounds of a worsening law-and-order situation. Zafarul Mulk and Abdul Shakur now restarted the Sunni civil disobedience movement by reciting *Madhe Sahaba* with their followers, and were consequently arrested in Lucknow. Zafarul Mulk also printed and circulated an appeal to Sunnis all over India to support the movement. In response, Sunni bands began to pour into Lucknow from different parts of the UP, other provinces in British India, as well as the native states. By the beginning of April 1939, interest in *Madhe Sahaba* agitation was reported from 22 out of the 48 districts in the UP.<sup>96</sup>

The government responded by granting Sunnis permission to have a *Madhe Sahaba* procession during *Barawafat*. This was seen as a major Sunni victory since it broke a 30-year practice of not allowing processions where *Madhe Sahaba* would be recited. The event passed off peacefully due to heavy police *bandobust* but Shia resentment at such a major concession only increased tensions. An open letter to the Mahatma published in the Shia newspaper, *The Moonlight*, reflected their resentment at the government's capitulation.

The question for you Mahatmaji to answer is whether the INC is prepared to give its seal of approval to the conduct of the UP government which has for all practical purposes substituted expediency in place of justice, equity and fairness? Are we to believe that the UP government has become so demoralized and so cowardly that it has no regard for honesty and truth? Are we to understand that while you were prepared yourself to starve yourself to death because the ruler of Rajkot broke his promise, you will not take the trouble to point out to the UP government how unmanly, how unjust, how partial, how immoral their conduct has been in connection with the *Madhe Sahaba* agitation? Will you permit the UP government to wantonly disregard

<sup>95</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 24 January, 1939, Haig Papers.

<sup>96</sup> PAI for the week ending 1 April, 1939.

the decision of a judicial committee and to ride roughshod over the civic and religious rights of the Shia community? Let me tell you however that if your answers to these questions be halting and indecisive, then you have no right to call the bureaucratic government satanic. Your own Congress government does not seem to be less satanic. In fact, it is much worse for the obvious reason that its predecessor bureaucratic government seldom, if ever, yielded to outside pressure or influence. It had its own definite policy, it has its own moral code, which it never failed to follow. Remember Mahatmaji you and your Congress are taking their trial before the bar of Shia opinion.<sup>97</sup>

The government's refusal to grant corresponding rights to recite *Tabarra* was attacked as a patent lack of equity or justice. An editorial in *The Moonlight* sought to refute the idea that *Madhe Sahaba* was harmless while *Tabarra* was abuse, as was being put out by Sunni propagandists. 'The root meaning of *Tabarra*', it noted, was 'staying aloof', while with regard to the three Caliphs it meant that the Shias did not recognize them as spiritual leaders. *Tabarra* was an article of faith with the Shias, and a number of traditions could be quoted to prove that it was enjoined upon them. *Madhe Sahaba* by contrast, the editorial pointed out, was neither an article of faith with the Sunnis nor was it enjoined upon them by any tradition. It was in fact *biddat* or 'innovation'. *Tabarra* was similar to *Lanat* or the calling of imprecations. No Muslim could call *Lanat* abuse. As the editorial noted,

No Musulman has said that the Quran is full of abuse, because in it we find that God has cursed the liar, the tyrants, the murderers, the non-believers etc etc. There are traditions to the effect that the Prophet in his time has cursed people by their names like Ibn Obaid and other munafiqs. The Shias unanimously believe that it is open to them and even virtuous to pray to God that he may keep some persons away from his mercy, which is the real meaning of *lanat*, if they are tyrants, murderers or non-believers.<sup>98</sup>

To therefore term *Tabarra* as 'abuse' was 'nothing short of an abuse of Islam, an abuse of the *Quran* and the abuse of Mohammedan law'.<sup>99</sup> *Tabarra* was further acclaimed as an example of Shia use of rational analysis and critical judgment. The Sunnis by contrast, it was pointed out, were prevented from the use of rational judgment and critique

<sup>97</sup> Open Letter by M. Golam Mustafa, Secretary Anjuman-i-Mustafavi, *The Moonlight*, 10 April, 1939, Qaid-e-Azam Papers, IOR Neg 10773, Reel 14, File 161, *Madhe Sahaba*, OIOC, British Library, London.

<sup>98</sup> *The Moonlight*, 10 April, 1939, *Madhe Sahaba* File, QA Papers.

<sup>99</sup> *Tabarra* was further distinguished from *Sub* or abuse which was forbidden by the *Quran*. It was pointed out that the *Quran* enjoined the believers not to abuse the Gods of others so that they may not out of ignorance abuse your God.

of the Caliphs as it was forbidden to them under the doctrine of *Kaffe-Lisan*, or the shutting of one's mouth. The Shias, the paper suggested, could not be expected to 'remain blind and dumb where the Companions of the Prophet were concerned'. Finally, the Shia right to criticize the caliphs was defended on the grounds that 'there was no defamation of the dead in criminal law'. It was argued that, if such were the case, no history could ever be written. Criticizing the Congress government for upholding Hanafi notions of justice instead of the law of the land, the editorial defiantly concluded that, 'if one community has the right of calling unrighteous men the benefactors of humanity, then the other community has the right of calling a spade a spade and thus save its ignorant masses from being taken by the *Madhe Sahaba* propaganda.'<sup>100</sup>

As the Shia agitation gained momentum, prominent Shia figures in the UP now began to court arrest by reciting *Tabarra*. These included Syed Ali Zaheer, the newly elected MLA from Allahabad-Jaunpur, the Princes of the royal family of Awadh, the son of Maulana Nasir, a respected Shia *mujtahid*, and the brothers of both the Rajas of Salempur and Pirpur. It was believed that Maulana Nasir himself, besides top ranking ML leaders such as Mahmudabad and Pirpur, would together court arrest, a development that could have a 'very bad effect on the League'.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, *pardah* ladies among the Shias threatened to court arrest in an effort to embarrass the government.

More importantly, the *Tabarra* agitation attracted attention from other parts of India as Shias across the country sought to express solidarity with their UP counterparts who were numerically dwarfed by the Sunnis. Shia bands came into Lucknow from the districts of Darbhanga, Monghyr, Saran, Patna, and Chapra in Bihar, from Bombay city, Poona, and Bhusawal in Bombay province, from Panipat, Karnal, Ambala, Jalandhar, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Sialkot, Multan, Ferozepur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, and Ludhiana in the Punjab, from Kohat and Bankash in NWFP, from the provinces of Assam and Bengal, and finally from the capital Delhi. They also came from the native states of Kashmir, Gwalior, Bharatpur, Jaipur, Bahawalpur, Rampur, and Malerkotla. Several hundred Shias courted arrest every week during the months of April and May 1939.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Karim ur Raza Khan to Jinnah, 27 April, 1939, *Madhe Sahaba* file, QA Papers.

<sup>102</sup> See PAIs for the months of April and May 1939.

As the *Tabarra* agitation spread, attracting volunteers from different parts of India, its control slipped into the hands of the Punjabi Shias, who, as Haig pointed out, were not as inclined to conduct the agitation in the 'gentlemanly manner of the Lucknow Shias'.<sup>103</sup> Public functions of government ministers such as G.B. Pant and Vijayalakshmi Pandit were disrupted, and filthy abuse heaped upon them by Punjabi Shias. A parliamentary secretary, Gopinath Srivastava, while visiting Agra jail to enquire into conditions under which prisoners were being held, was abused and assaulted by Shia prisoners.<sup>104</sup> The jails in UP were already full to capacity and overflowing as several thousands from both sides courted arrest. The government now began to plan on setting up jail-camps to handle the ever increasing volume of detentions. The UP government also approached the Punjab and NWFP governments to stop the departure of Shia bands headed for the UP and these requests were readily granted. In late March 1939, 4,000 Shias and 15,000 Sunnis brickbatted each other near the Asafuddaula Imambara in Lucknow but a major riot, which may have resulted in heavy casualties, was averted by the police firing several volleys into the air. In the following month, Sunni demonstrators stormed into the legislative assembly in Lucknow by breaking through the police barrier and disrupting its proceedings, seriously embarrassing the government.

If the UP government was deeply concerned about the deteriorating law and order situation, the ML watched the political scene with a mixture of apprehension and helplessness as the conflict spread not only to other districts of the UP but also involved Shias and Sunnis from different parts of India. The UP ML leadership now implored Jinnah to make a decisive intervention. Some members of the ML's Allahabad unit sent a plea to Jinnah to go on a fast unto death, like Mahatma Gandhi, in order to force Shias and Sunnis to come to a settlement.<sup>105</sup> A desperate Mahmudabad, Pirpur and Ismail Khan, telegraphed Jinnah with a fervent message: 'For God's sake come. Critical moment for Muslims.'<sup>106</sup> Similarly urgent messages were sent to Jinnah from other parts of the country.<sup>107</sup> Jinnah, however, refused to take a stand on the issue or come to Lucknow. This was because as

<sup>103</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 12 June, 1939, Haig Papers.

<sup>104</sup> PAI for the week ending 3 June, 1939.

<sup>105</sup> *The Pioneer*, 29 April, 1939.

<sup>106</sup> Telegram by Mahmudabad, Pirpur, Ismail Khan to Jinnah 1 May, 1939, *Madhe Shaba* File, QA Papers.

<sup>107</sup> See Telegrams by Hassan Ispahán to Jinnah from Calcutta and Sir Sultan Ahmad from Patna, *Madhe Sahaba* File, QA Papers.



Sir Raza Ali wrote, 'If the League took cognizance of the matter and if its decision failed to find the acceptance of the Sunnis and Shias of Lucknow, it would deal a death blow at the League [sic].'<sup>108</sup> However, Raza Ali also feared that unless UP ML leaders intervened at least in their 'personal capacity', the Muslim community would 'split into two parties on sectarian grounds which will paralyze our political activities for many years to come'.<sup>109</sup> Jinnah however threatened to expel any ML member who dared to intervene in the matter and make the ML a party in the conflict.<sup>110</sup> Khaliquzzaman, the ML party leader in the UP assembly echoed Jinnah's views stating that 'the League had kept itself aloof and did not take any initiative in order to settle the matter, and would maintain the same attitude to the problem.'<sup>111</sup> This stand invited ridicule coming from an organization that styled itself as the sole and authoritative representative of the Indian Muslims. As Haig wrote to the Viceroy in Delhi,

It is interesting to observe the powerlessness of the Muslim League to bring about a settlement between two sections of their own supporters. It seems to me that the Muslim League, like the Congress in the past, is really strong only in opposition. When faced with a necessity for positive action and policy, it seems to be unable to secure agreement and has no adequate leadership.<sup>112</sup>

Mahmudabad tried to intervene in the dispute in his 'personal capacity' but could not make much headway. The Nizam of Hyderabad, the ruler of the largest native state, was alarmed enough with the existing state of affairs to send a telegram to the Viceroy. The Nizam expressed fears that the problem, 'If not taken in hand, quickly, may lead to many complications or also it is possible that it will not be limited to one place only but may become an all India question later on.'<sup>113</sup> The Nizam beseeched the Viceroy to use his influence to resolve the matter which he saw as having the same potential as the Kanpur mosque affair.<sup>114</sup> With Jinnah refusing to intervene,

<sup>108</sup> Sir Raza Ali to Jinnah, 19 June, 1939, *Madhe Sahaba* File, QA Papers.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 9 May, 1939, Haig Papers.

<sup>111</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 14 June, 1939.

<sup>112</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 12 June, 1939, Haig Papers.

<sup>113</sup> Nizam of Hyderabad to Lord Linlithgow, 25 April, 1939, Linlithgow Papers MSS EUR. F125/121.

<sup>114</sup> The Kanpur mosque affair occurred in 1930. The UP Government as part of its Town Improvement Scheme in Kanpur decided to demolish a part of the mosque compound in order to let a road pass through. This was objected to by Muslim leaders and snowballed into a major movement across India.

22 prominent Muslim leaders belonging to all political parties, including ML Premiers Sikandar Hayat Khan and Fazlul Haq, met at Simla and issued an appeal to Shias and Sunnis to renounce *Madhe Sahaba* and *Tabarra* in order to pave the way for an honorable settlement.<sup>115</sup> Maulana Abul Kalam Azad issued a similar statement, but these appeals were derisively rejected by Zafarul Mulk who responded stating that,

The Sunnis of Lucknow cannot even for a moment tolerate that the Madhe Sahaba and Tabarra should be placed on an equal footing. . . . The main object of the Shias in opposing the Madhe Sahaba procession is that they are fully alive to the fact that if it is allowed to gain ground, the Sunni masses will in course of time become proof against the lure of taziadari and the door of proselytization to Shiaism will be effectively closed. . . . The superior organization of the Shias backed by their wealth and propaganda can neither prevail upon the Sunnis to give up their religious and civil rights nor induce them to accept the dictum of an Allsop or any other misinformed gentleman that the right of praise and the license to curse can at any stage become analogous and interchangeable.<sup>116</sup>

By the middle of the summer though, as Harry Haig the Governor of UP wrote to the Viceroy, fatigue was beginning to set in on all sides, raising hopes of a settlement. However, as Haig added,

But whenever the movement looks like dying down from natural causes, we can depend on our neighbours to galvanize it once more into action, and the latest threat comes from the Khaksars who have been for some time proclaiming ultimatums, that they intend to come to Lucknow and stop the dispute by force.<sup>117</sup>

### **The Khaksar Intervention and the Final Denouement**

The Shia-Sunni conflict, and the ML's failure to resolve the dispute, created a vacuum in the Muslim political leadership which aspiring contenders were attracted to fill. It led to an active intervention by the Khaksar party led by the mercurial Allama Mashraqi. The dispute was seen by Mashraqi as an opportunity to build up his standing as an important Muslim leader who had ended a fratricidal conflict among the Muslims. The Khaksars, a significant presence in the Punjab, had over the past year been building their organization in many districts of the UP with their headquarters located in Bahraich. They

<sup>115</sup> *The Statesman*, 3 June, 1939.

<sup>116</sup> *The Pioneer*, 6 June, 1939.

<sup>117</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 9 August, 1939, Haig Papers.

publicized their ideology through their press organ the *Al-Islah*. The Khaksars caught the public eye across the UP with their uniforms, their military style parades through cities and carrying special spades with exaggerated blades known as *belchas*.

Mashraqi was initially anxious to portray himself as someone with whom the government could do business. Telegrams were sent to the UP government offering to help them resolve the issue. If the UP government failed, he promised that his Khaksars would forcefully end the problem.<sup>118</sup> Mashraqi threatened to assassinate both Shia and Sunni leaders if they did not come to an agreement by a certain date, and justified his plans in terms of the tenets of the *Quran*. The Khaksars also openly expressed their disdain for Gandhian non-violence and declared their preference for violence as a political weapon to achieve their goals.

The government's lukewarm response to his offer to solve the Shia-Sunni problem failed to amuse the Khaksar leader. Mashraqi now declared that the UP government was an enemy of the Muslims and keen to keep the Shia-Sunni dispute alive. He therefore exhorted his Khaksars to fight the UP government with violence. Mashraqi next ordered a large contingent of Khaksars from Punjab and a section from Sind known as 'Janbaz' force to arrive in Lucknow. The people of Lucknow were then treated to the spectacle of the public flogging of the Lucknow Khaksar leader Wahiduddin Haider on Mashraqi's orders. His crime lay in complying with the Lucknow Deputy Commissioner's orders forbidding the carrying of *belchas* by the Khaksars, besides forbidding a fire cracker reception for the Janbaz contingent. This act was in violation of a Khaksar pledge that in case of a conflict between the orders of a government official and a Khaksar officer, the latter had always to be obeyed by the party members. In late August, the Khaksar dictator himself arrived in Lucknow and delivered a series of inflammatory speeches at public meetings. Ahrars who raised cries of opposition at these meetings were manhandled away. The editor of an Ahrar newspaper which had published articles criticizing the Khaksars and Mashraqi was threatened, and a newsboy was beaten up.

Khaksar violence at many places in the UP left the government with no option but to arrest Mashraqi. This surprised the Khaksar leader who had not expected the government to adopt such a tough posture, especially since it was cautious in dealing with Sunni or Shia

<sup>118</sup> See Note by the Chief Secretary, United Provinces Government, on the Development of the Khaksar Agitation in the United Provinces L/P&J/5/268; OIOC, British Library, London.

extremists and appeared weak and tired. A deflated Mashraqi began to negotiate with the government and offered to go back to the Punjab, if it would provide a special train for himself and his Khaksars. The UP government refused, unwilling to elevate his standing through any special measures. Finally, a compromise deal was struck by which the government agreed to buy tickets for the Khaksars on a regular train and send them out of the UP. However, on the day of their departure, the Khaksars who had boarded the train, got off according to a pre-arranged bugle signal, just as it was about to depart from Lucknow railway station. This led to pandemonium at the railway station and caused considerable irritation to the government. The next day, though, a chastened Mashraqi signed an undertaking to go back to the Punjab with his followers and not to return to Lucknow for a period of one year. Mashraqi was therefore released and immediately put on a train for the Punjab. But it was now the mercurial dictator's turn to repeat the antics employed by his followers a few days earlier. At Malihabad, just outside Lucknow, the train's communication chord was pulled to force it to a stop. Mashraqi got off the train and then got into another train bound back towards Lucknow. On being informed that he would be re-arrested by the police in Lucknow, Mashraqi got off the train and set off for the neighbouring town of Sandila. There he was joined by a party of Khaksars from Lucknow, and together they travelled without railway tickets to Delhi.

From Delhi, Mashraqi started a campaign of 'abusive vilification' of the UP government stating that he had never signed any undertaking and charged the government with forgery. By the middle of September, Mashraqi started again for Lucknow in order to retrieve his reputation that had been tainted by his somewhat inglorious exit on the previous occasion. The train was stopped again at Malihabad, this time by the government authorities, and Mashraqi was warned that he would be arrested. He was given the option of going back to the Punjab, but this was rejected by the Khaksar leader who was keen on becoming a martyr. He was promptly arrested and sentenced to one month simple imprisonment for causing public disorder. This led to a Khaksar influx into the UP from the Punjab.<sup>119</sup> The Khaksars resorted to considerable violence against the police in resisting arrest in many places and in an incident in Bulandshahr district in western UP, a number of Khaksars were killed by police gunfire. The turn of events attracted considerable support and sympathy for the Khaksars from the UP Muslims.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 25 September, 1939, Haig Papers.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

The forceful repression of the Khaksars by the UP government and the imprisonment of Mashriqi, combined with the eccentric and inconsistent efforts by the Khaksars, now opened a window of opportunity for the ML to reassert itself in UP Muslim politics. The ML tried to ride on the wave of Muslim resentment against government repression. Eminent UP ML figures such as Sir Ziauddin Ahmad, Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, interceded on Mashraqi's behalf, with the UP government. The ML legislature party demanded Mashraqi's release from prison and expressed sympathy with the Khaksars on the floor of the UP assembly. Jinnah, along with Liaquat Ali Khan, visited a Khaksar camp in Delhi to express ML's sympathies with their movement and condemned the repression unleashed upon them. At this juncture, the onset of World War II in Europe transformed the political landscape in India. Shortly afterwards, in late October, Congress ministries all over India resigned in protest against India being dragged into the War by Britain without the consent of the Indians themselves. The crisis was a tremendous blessing to the ML and could not have come at a more appropriate time. The Congress high command now sought unity between different political groups in India in order to present a joint Indian response to the British government. Keen to get the Muslims on board, the Congress turned again to Jinnah.

The Khaksar issue in the UP was a major point of discussion in the meetings between Nehru and Jinnah. Jinnah demanded and was supplied with relevant documents relating to the Khaksars by Rafi Kidwai, the Home Minister in the UP government. Nehru seemed hopeful of a joint Congress-ML front after what he considered were extremely fruitful talks with Jinnah over several hours in late November. However, the ML leader surprised the Congress with his call to the Muslims of the 'minority provinces' to celebrate a Day of Deliverance on 22 December, 1939. It could be argued that one of the reasons for Jinnah's call was his attempt at again rallying the *Qaum* in the ML's putative bastion in the UP, wracked as it had been by internecine the Shia-Sunni conflict over the past several months. The Day of Deliverance however passed off uneventfully in the UP. Nehru reported to Gandhi that,

Deliverance Day was a failure in the UP. Many of the meetings started off in a very small way, but then curious sightseers, chiefly Hindus joined them [to] find out what was happening. Some meetings were also held on that day in mosques and outside condemning the Muslim League proposal.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Nehru to Gandhi, 25 December, 1939, SWJN, vol. 10, p. 417.

The new Governor of the UP, Sir Maurice Hallett, concurred with this judgment. As he wrote to the Viceroy,

I do not think that Deliverance Day, of which many reasonable Muslims disapproved, was as great a success as would appear from newspaper accounts. Some collectors report little enthusiasm and in most districts, meetings were smaller than expected.<sup>122</sup>

### Conclusion

While the period of Congress rule in the UP witnessed an impressive growth of the ML as a party with the ability to harness rising Muslim resentment against the provincial Congress government, the party struggled to assert its control over Muslim politics in the face of sectarian tensions within the community. The ML therefore still had a task ahead in terms of politically mobilizing the UP Muslims by the time the Congress governments had resigned. It is due to these existing tensions within the Muslim community that the idea of Pakistan became so central to the politics of the ML after 1940. The ML effectively played up the fear of disunity in the *Qaum* and presented Pakistan as a symbol of Muslim unity in its campaigns throughout India in order to damp down underlying tensions within the Muslim community.<sup>123</sup> This tactic was certainly effective in the UP. The Shia-Sunni problem in the UP persisted through the 1940s but henceforth was confined to the city of Lucknow. It did not become an all-India issue as was feared in some quarters during the latter half of 1939.

<sup>122</sup> Hallett to Linlithgow, 1 January, 1940, Hallett Papers.

<sup>123</sup> For an elaboration of this argument see David Gilmartin, 'Partition, Pakistan and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, no. 4 (November 1998), pp. 1068–1095. I, however, differ from Gilmartin in that I do not see Pakistan as purely a 'symbolic vision of Muslim unity' which was 'extraordinarily vague' in the public mind or as ultimately a 'non-territorial vision of nationality'. For an elaboration of my argument see my forthcoming book, *Between Homeland and the Nation: The Muslims of the United Provinces and the Movement for Pakistan 1935–1947*, based on my doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of History, University of Minnesota, May 2008.