

Islam as a Foundation of Composite Nationalism: Rejaul Karim in Bengal

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Abstract: The decades of 1920s and 1930s are marked by communal politics in India. Muslim League was gaining strong foothold among the Muslims then. But at the same time there were some Muslim leaders who opposed the idea of Pakistan. Among these nationalist Muslim leaders, names of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani are well-known but little focus is given on Congress leader from Bengal Rejaul Karim. Karim was on the one hand deeply associated with Bengali language, its culture and on the other hand tried to make Islam the basis of composite nationalism in India. In this paper we will discuss how the idea of Rejaul Karim, an essayist, professor and Indian National Congress leader, of making Islam the basis of composite nationalism in India had been reflected in his writing.

Keywords: Islam, Separatism, Composite Nationalism, Indian National Congress

Introduction

Resistance to the British colonial rule by the Muslims in Bengal started from 19th century. Reaction to the British rule from the Muslims was in two levels-i) Farazi and Wahabi movement 1818-1858 and the great revolt of 1857-58 and ii) movement spearheaded by Muslim intelligentsia and religionists during 1858-1947. Wahabis were the first from the Muslims who launched war against the colonialists in a large part of Bengal. But their way of resistance towards British rule was abandoned in the second half of 19th century by a section of English educated Muslim elite class. Nabab Abdul Latif of Bengal and Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan from Aligarh tried to uplift the condition of the Muslims through English education. For the ulama of Deoband the vehicle for uplifting the condition of the Muslims of the subcontinent was the religious education. But one striking similarity was that both of these approaches were devoid of opposition to the British. They rather chose the path of co-operation with the British rule for the development of the Muslims and this eventually gave birth to religious separatism. British liberal education, ideals of democracy had helped the middle-class Hindu society to launch war against regressive custom and modernize themselves but same western education was used in the Muslim society to shut the door for the liberal western ideas and solidify the Islamic society.

The awakening of the Muslims in India was on the basis of religious separation. It failed to spread with vivid mindfulness. The attempts that were seen in past from the part of some saints to make the room for all the religions in a multireligious country like India and uphold the ideal of humanism was absent during this time. Moreover, the Islamization process in the first half of 20th century, changes in demography, Hindu nature of Indian nationalism, uneven development of Hindu and Muslim community had facilitated the environment of separatism.

Historians have divided the Muslim politics in 20th century into three categories-i) communal politics led by Muslim League, ii) anti-British nationalistic movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, iii) armed struggle led by Muslim nationalists. But in the context of the then political scenario, the socio-economic situation the influence of Muslim League was far bigger than that of nationalist Muslims on the Muslim revolutionaries.

But, though, small in number there were definitely some Muslim politicians in India who critiqued the idea of Pakistan as it was being developed in 1930s and 1940s. among the nationalist Muslims names of people like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani (1879-1957) are well-known but little focus is given on Congress leader from Bengal Rejaul Karim. Karim was on the one hand deeply associated with Bengali language, its culture and on the other hand tried to make Islam the basis of composite nationalism in India.

Life History & Education of Rejaul Karim

Rejaul Karim was born in 1902 in Margram, Birbhum, West Bengal. He was brought up in a religious but non communal environment at home. As Karim was a pious Muslim and liberal humanist and non-communal it was the result of this childhood. His primary education was started at village *pathshala* and then he was sent to Anglo-Oriental Middle School. Later he was admitted into Taltala High School at Calcutta. He studies there for $\frac{3}{4}$ years and then became a student of

Calcutta Madrasa where he received his degree of matriculation with 1st division on 1919. Then he took admission at St. Xaviers College at Intermediate Arts Course. But Rejaul Karim could not study there for long because being inspired by the ideals of Indian independence he left the college. He again took admission in Baharampore Krishnanath College in 1926. He completed his bachelor degree with honours in English in 1930 from this college. In spite of having financial problems, he passed post-graduation in English in 1934 from University of Calcutta. He later in 1936 passed law but could not practice for long. He joined Baharampore Girls' College as a lecturer and served there till retirement.

Literary Works to uphold the Nationalists' cause

During the non-cooperation movement Rejaul Karim left the college and devoted himself in the freedom movement. This was the period when the question of Khilafat had made the two communities in India come closer. Rejaul Karim devoted himself in literary work. 'Sourav' was the first magazine edited by him. During this time, he, on the one hand, was inspired by the freedom movement and on the other hand felt deep attraction towards cultivation or practice of literature.

In 'Sourav' he had clearly stated that service to the society and motherland was their aim. During his college time he had set up an organization named '*Al Helal*'. He chose this name probably being inspired by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Karim was an ardent follower of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Kalam once said in one of his Presidential speeches in Indian National Congress in 1923 that if the angel came down from the crowd and sitting on the top of Qutub Minar of Delhi that India will achieve 'Swaraj' at the cost of communal harmony between Hindu and Muslim he would not accept that because if Swaraj came late, it is loss for India only but

once Hindu Muslim unity is gone it is the loss for entire mankind. Karim was highly inspired by this and took up communal harmony as vow of his life.

During 1930s and 1940s when Bengal faces most turbulent political situation Rejaul Karim's pen was most active and fertile. On 28th March, 1929 when Muslim League placed its fourteen points demands in the Muslim League Conference, Congress objected to it. As a worker of Congress Rejaul Karim also protested against this decision. He took his pen and wrote an article against this decision. During this time, he wrote regularly against communalism in '*Desh*' magazine and '*Ananda Bazar Patrika*', '*Musalmaner Dabi*', '*Sampradayikotar Moha*', '*Sampradayik Nirbachoner Bifolota*', '*Samprodayik Nirbachoner khoti*', '*Keno Mishro Nirbachon Chai*', '*Swaraj O Samprodayikota*' etc. His second book was '*Naya Bharoter Vitti*'. This book shows how a pious Muslim gives message of composite nationalism on the basis of non-communalism. This book consists of thirteen essays. We find his deep faith on the fact that India would get independence soon and it would be based on non-violence, love and brotherhood. Criticizing Md Iqbal's vision about nationalism Karim had argued that Indian nationalism is not like European one because ours is associated with spiritualism. He wrote that ideals that Indian National Congress is setting up was gradually getting popular and he had a deep faith that in free India there would be no organization like 'Hindu Mahasabha', 'Muslim Conference', 'Sikh League' etc. He even argued that no extra territorial power could harm India in the name of pan Islamicism or Muslim solidarity across the borders.

The first book he wrote in English was 'For India and Islam'. In the introduction of this book, he wrote that when he saw the Muslims of India is almost dead politically, then being fully aware of their impending destruction he could not sit idle. He claimed it was his duty to make them aware. His essay in this book is a warning to the Muslims so that they could follow the path of valour and masculinity. Karim used to believe that regressive mentality in religious matter is more harmful and dangerous than communalism. Anti Hindu mentality and behaviour of most of the Muslims was a form of this religious regress and these Muslims are basically in support of imperialism. In his essay 'An Open letter to Sir Md. Iqbal', Rejaul Karim with due respect and admiration for Md Iqbal urged him to refrain from communal politics because he felt that upper class Muslim had no solidarity with or comparison for the lower-class Muslims. In the concluding part of this book, he wrote that let the slogan of the young generation of Muslims be '*Hubbal Watan Minal Inam*' i.e. 'Love the country is an article of faith with the Muslims'. Throughout his life Rejaul Karim bears this faith in his mind above communalism.

During 1937-41 Rejaul Karim also wrote in the magazine 'Naya Bangla' edited by the general secretary, Bengal Regional Congress Committee. His writing was mainly about history of Muslim countries, culture and politics. On 1938 he wrote an essay named 'Dharma O Sahitya' in a book 'Jagriti'. It reminds us that in spite of being a member of INC he was primarily an essayist, a philosopher, an author and that leads him to feel the danger of religious aggression on language.

During this time as a part of identity formation there was an attempt to create 'Muslim Literature' which would be loaded with many Arabic and Persian words. Rejaul Karim wrote that the literature that would be written to get praised by the orthodox Muslim might be Muslim but would fail to qualify as literature and will soon be doomed into oblivion.

Rejaul Karim along with his elder brother Moinuddin Hossain published a daily paper 'Durbin' to promote the ideals of nationalism among the Muslims. Many famous persons like Rabindranath Tagore, Netaji Subhash Ch. Bose sent their blessings but for some reasons they could not continue with this paper for long.

On 1939 Rejaul Karim wrote another book named '*Jatiyatar Pothe*'. Regarding his motive Karim writes in this book that that many people say it is a sin for a Muslim to think about the nationalism because their love and faith for community does not know the any geographical boundaries. But according to Rejaul Karim how nonsense these ideas are now proven by countries like Turkey, Iran and Iraq. To protect the security and existence of the Indians, according to Karim, Muslims in India must follow this rule and ideal. When India is perturbed with two nation theory, Rejaul

Karim citing many examples from Hazrat's life showed that Hazrat had never spoken only about Muslims when he spoke about a nation. Rather Karim said the prophet wished to make the bond of Muslims and non-Muslims stronger through a nation.

In 1941 Rejaul Karim wrote a book 'Pakistan Examined'. Just one year before in 1940 the demand for a separate state for the Muslim was placed in Lahore Congress of Muslim League. The demand was supported by the theory that culture of Hindus and Muslims was different. In this book Rejaul Karim opposed this idea and argued that Muslim league is confused Islamic religion and Islamic culture. He argued religion and culture is not the same thing. Religion is unchangeable whereas culture changes in accordance with time and place. Culture borrows many features from neighbourhood and time. He further argued that nation or nationhood in India is started from Sultani era. Both Hindus and Muslims took help from one another in building independent state.

Rejaul Karim put all his effort to prove that idea of Pakistan was nothing but a bluff.

On 1942, he wrote another book like 'Pakistan Examined' with a Bengali version too named '*Pakistaner Bichar*'. In this book he warned that about the true aim behind the creation of 'Pakistan' and that this dream would soon come to an end. His essays exhibit his thought that the idea of nationalism or nation had nothing to do with the religion rather it includes all the people of a country. Standing in a turbulent period among different sectarian schemes for partition, Rejaul Karim firmly raised his voice claiming futility of an idea called 'Pakistan'.

On 1944 Congress Sahitya Sangha was established near College Street market, Calcutta. Rejaul Karim was an active and founder member of this body. Literati like Sajanikanta Das, Subodh Ghosh was associated with it. On Rejaul Karim's initiation a branch of this association was established in Saidabad, Berhampore. Their aim was not only to propagate ideas of nationalism and freedom but also to collect, preserve and publish olden folk literature of Bengal considering it national treasure. On the first conference of the association Rejaul

Karim in its Presidential lecture mentioned this literary association does not belong to any political party not even belonged to any community. Rather the assimilation of different religion, communities in music, poetry, novel, essay etc.

Rejaul Karim was also associated with the famous '*Nabayuga*' magazine. Amidst huge communal tension and battle, this magazine run by the Muslim, succeeded in maintaining impartiality and it also had a huge readership irrespective of caste and community. He was associated with '*Nabayuga*' till 1948. On 1948 he joined Baharampore Girls' College as lecturer and left '*Nabayuga*'. But in post independent era too Rejaul Karim fought against communalism.

Conclusion

We have discussed Rejaul Karim's writing during 1920s and 30s, the pre independent era of communal politics. But his fight against communalism continued till last day of his life. He was deeply inspired and guided by the ideas of nationalism. Gathering example from religion and history he wanted to convince the people from his own religion that love for country and communal harmony are part of Islamic tradition. It is true that he was a dedicated Muslim but in case of State he was always in favour of secularization that is distancing the State from religion. Rejaul Karim, thus, remaining a devoted follower of Islam had widened the path of union of Hindu and Muslim, reasonable free thinking and judgment at a time when the air was communalism was blowing strongly.

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