

FAITH, NATION, AND DISSENT: THE KHILAFAT MOVEMENT AND THE POLITICAL DIVIDE IN BRITISH INDIA

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Abstract

The dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate following World War I marked a pivotal moment for the global Muslim community, and particularly for Indian Muslims grappling with the loss of a symbol that embodied both religious and political unity. In British India, the Khilafat Movement emerged as a mass mobilization effort to protest the dismemberment of the Caliphate and to assert Muslim solidarity in the colonial political arena. While often idealized as an anti-colonial struggle, the movement's consequences were far more complex and far-reaching. It accelerated the involvement of religious leadership in politics, redefined communal identities, and exacerbated sectarian divisions, despite temporarily uniting Hindus and Muslims under Gandhi's non-cooperation campaign.

Yet, the Khilafat Movement also revealed ideological fault lines within the Indian nationalist struggle. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, an advocate of constitutionalism and secular political practice, resisted the merger of religion and mass politics that characterized the Khilafat campaign. His marginalization during this period foreshadowed his eventual departure from the Indian National Congress and reinforced his belief in an independent political path for Indian Muslims. Meanwhile, figures like Aga Khan III and Syed Amir Ali supported the Turkish cause through diplomatic and journalistic means, offering a contrasting model

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of elite-led, reformist Muslim politics. This article critically explores the dynamics of the Khilafat Movement, its impact on Indian Muslim political identity, the divergence of leadership strategies, and its long-term influence on the evolution of Muslim separatism and the eventual demand for Pakistan.

Key words: Khilafat Movement, World War, Muslim Politics, the Indian National Congress

The Origins of the Khilafat Movement and Muslim Anxiety

The Khilafat Movement was born out of a profound psychological and political crisis among Indian Muslims following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. As Naeem Qureshi argues, the movement was not merely a reaction to global Islamic concerns but a strategic effort to preserve Muslim political relevance in a Hindu-majority colonial (Qureshi, 1999, pp. 52–53). Indian Muslims feared that the dismantling of the Caliphate would weaken their communal status and reduce their influence in the Indian nationalist movement. This fear, compounded by a minority complex, galvanized support for the Khilafat cause.

The dissolution of the Khilafat after World War I came as a major shock to the Muslim world. While Muslim political authority had collapsed globally, the unique circumstances in the Indian subcontinent, especially the Hindu-Muslim alliance and British accommodation allowed Indian Muslims to remain politically active. Although often portrayed as an anti-colonial movement, the Khilafat Movement's most lasting consequence was a shift in Muslim political thought away from secularism and toward a more religious and communal framework. It also marked the rise of the *Ulama* (Muslim clergy) as political actors, a development that continues to influence till today in politics in both India and Pakistan. As Alvi notes, the tragic irony is that the

Movement ultimately undermined both Turkish and Arab nationalism. Gandhi's leadership in the Khilafat campaign has been overly celebrated by Indian nationalist historians, who often overlook its complex legacy, (Alavi,1987, p. 273). In contrast, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who opposed the religious framing of the Movement, has been unfairly labeled as a communalist, despite his secular orientation. In the end, the Khilafat Movement paved the way for the political empowerment of the Muslim religious elite, a fact later praised by Islamic ideologues.

It is argued that the Khilafat Movement represented a deliberate and strategic endeavor aimed at safeguarding the political interests of Muslims in colonial India. Rather than being solely an expression of religious solidarity, the movement effectively blended the ideological currents of pan-Islamism with the broader aspirations of Indian nationalism in pursuit of independence from British rule (Qureshi, 1999, pp. 52–53).

The origins of this movement lay in a deeply rooted psychological concern among Indian Muslims: the belief that the dismantling of the Ottoman Caliphate would severely diminish their political stature in comparison to the Hindu majority. Beyond the emotive appeal of pan-Islamic unity, it was this existential anxiety—rooted in the fear of marginalization and political irrelevance, that propelled Indian Muslims into political mobilization. The movement thus emerged as a reflection of the community's minority complex and its apprehensions regarding an unpredictable political future under changing colonial dynamics.

Leadership and Cross-Class Mobilization

Following the collapse of Mughal Empire, men like Sayyad Ahmad Khan, Muslims came to the rescue and neutralized the environment. However, around the turn of the century, a new breed of men took over control from the traditional leadership. Tempered by the pan-Islamism and

heightened by their spirits, this leadership put the Muslim politics on a radical path. The Khilafat Movement had a profound impact, compelling religious scholars (Ulama) to leave the seclusion of their *hujras* and motivating the affluent to abandon their privileged confines to actively participate in the national struggle (Qureshi, 1999, pp.53).

The Khilafat Movement succeeded in mobilizing a diverse coalition of Indian Muslim society. Its leadership drew from both the Western-educated elite and the traditional religious class. The leadership of the Khilafat Movement emerged from a broad spectrum of Indian society, encompassing both Western-educated professionals and graduates of traditional Islamic seminaries. Figures such as Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari and Hakim Ajmal Khan represented the medical field, while religious scholars like Maulana Abdul Bari and Abul Kalam Azad brought clerical authority. Prominent journalists included the Ali Brothers, Shaukat Ali and Mohammad Ali Jauhar, as well as Hasrat Mohani. Wealthy merchants such as Seth Chotani and Omar Sobhani lent financial and organizational support, while legal professionals like M.H. Kudwai, T.A.K. Sherwani, and Syed Zahur Ahmad added further credibility to the cause. Together, this diverse coalition effectively galvanized mass political opinion. Much of the movement's momentum was driven by the religious zeal of leaders such as the Ali Brothers and Hasrat Mohani, who infused the campaign with deep emotional and spiritual appeal. was quite inadequately countered by moderate leadership of Quaid e Azam, Sir Shafee, Syed Amir Ali and Sir Agha Khan. As a result, the movement marked the rise of the *Ulama* as political actors, a phenomenon with long-lasting consequences in both India and Pakistan (Wasti, 1993).

Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Constitutional Opposition

Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah remained one of the most vocal critics of the Khilafat Movement's alliance with Gandhi's non-cooperation campaign. Though critical of British policies, particularly the Rowlett Act and the abolition of the Caliphate, Quaid insisted on constitutional methods. He warned that mass agitation based on religious sentiment would lead to social unrest and political instability. At the Nagpur session of the Congress, he was the sole dissenter against Gandhi's resolution. Despite public hostility, he stood firm, arguing that the non-cooperation movement was politically unsound and practically unworkable (Wolpert, 2024, p. 62).

Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah the brightest star in the Indian political firmament surfed almost total eclipse during the non-cooperation movement. He tried to steer the League clear of the Khilafat Movement by raising technical objection at the League Council meeting in Delhi in December 1918, but was vehemently opposed and overruled by an overwhelming majority of the members (Allana, 1985, p. 170).

In November 1919, a joint conference of Hindus and Muslims was convened in Delhi, attended by prominent leaders including Fazl-ul-Haq, then president of the All-India Muslim League. On this occasion, Muhammad Ali Jinnah emphasized the importance of communal harmony, urging that "we should renounce any lurking spirit of strife and quarrel with other communities and seek their help and assistance in our troubles and difficulties" (Mujahid, 1981, pp. 56–57). During the proceedings, the issue of joint communal protection was discussed as a means to foster goodwill between Hindus and Muslims. It was at this juncture that Gandhi proposed launching a non-cooperation movement against British rule, a proposition that

Jinnah firmly opposed, favoring constitutional methods over mass civil disobedience (Mujahid, 1981, pp. 56–57).

In December 1919, the second session of the Khilafat Conference convened in Amritsar, coinciding with the annual meetings of both the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. However, the environment of distress and mistrust could not be vaporized. Jinnah despite his best efforts and foresight could not find room to play a prominent role in moderating the Khilafat movement that passed into the hands of the aggressive Ali brothers, Dr. Kitchlew and the militant segment of the Ulamas. Slowly this vehemence and vigour started taking over the Muslims League moderate advance (Qureshi, 1999, .27).

Jinnah's opposition to the Gandhi proposal was based on certain principles and considerations. He shuddered to think of the consequences of playing with the sentiments of the masses. He believed that the struggle for freedom, once the possibility of an armed revolt was ruled out, had to be carried out through constitutional methods. This didn't mean merely passing resolutions; other methods had to be adopted as and when necessary. Jinnah took the back seat and did not join the Indian leaders who met the Viceroy on January 19, 1920, to plead for settlement with Turkey (Qalb-i-Abid, 1997, p. 45).

In its third session in February 1920 at Bombay, the Khilafat Conference passed the resolution of loyalties to assist the Caliph in all possible ways in the wars. Jinnah and other moderate fellows didn't participate in the Khilafat agitation. Jinnah's views on the non-cooperation movement were expressed in a letter, he wrote to Gandhi (Ikram, 1997, p. 190).

Muhammad Ali Jinnah expressed strong reservations about the direction of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement, warning that such a course of action was destined for disaster. He criticized the plan for its appeal primarily among the

uneducated and politically inexperienced youth, asserting that while he lacked the authority to reverse its causes, he nonetheless felt compelled to caution his fellow countrymen about the grave consequences of pursuing such an extreme strategy (Wolpert, 2024, p. 63).

Consequently, Jinnah firmly rejected Gandhi's proposal to launch a nationwide non-cooperation campaign, viewing it as politically imprudent and detrimental to constitutional progress (Wolpert, 2024, p. 63). But Gandhi's Programme was finally adopted by both the communities and Jinnah was left with a situation he was later to face again and again; the British following offensive policies and the Indian leaders responding with answers that injured the country, leaving him standing alone and unable to support either party and hated by both.

At the Nagpur session, Muhammad Ali Jinnah stood as the sole dissenting voice against Gandhi's proposed resolution. Despite facing intense hostility from the audience, he maintained that the non-cooperation strategy would neither dismantle the British Empire nor serve as a rational or politically viable course of action. He argued that it lacked both strategic soundness and practical feasibility (Wolpert, 2024, p. 64). Basically Jinnah had formed a poor opinion of Gandhi from the first time they met in London in 1914. Some remarks by Gokhale giving an estimate of Gandhi in private also influenced Jinnah and as he came to see more of him and his mysterious ways, his doubts were confirmed. Jinnah was horrified to bringing the politics into the religion in a big way. He strongly believed that it might help the movement initially, but would do incalculable harm to the country in the long run. Not only the Khilafat Movement moved on religious basis, Gandhi himself injected a big dose of religion into politics, right from the time of *satyagraha*.

Khilafat also involved the *Ulamas* in the politics. The new look of Ulama didn't broaden their outlook: on the contrary,

Muhammad Ali Jauhar and Gandhi though both deeply religious and both justifying their policies by their different religions, couldn't create a federation of faith (Khairi, 1995, p. 173). They created a temporary and fragile unity, which was bound to be shattered and to prove counterproductive. Dependent as it was on different and mutually hostile beliefs Muhammad Ali Jauhar, even when on the best of the relation with Gandhi, use to say that worst Muslim sinner and criminal was better than *Mahatmajee*.

Anyhow not the whole crowd but some British such as Colonel Wedgwood, who had the opportunity to hear Muhammad Ali Jinnah's speak, expressed deep admiration for his forthrightness. While acknowledging limited familiarity with Jinnah's political views, he nonetheless praised his moral courage, remarking that regardless of political alignment, anyone bold enough to address the audience so candidly commanded his respect. According to Wedgwood, the foremost quality of any political leader is not intellect, but bravery (Bolitho, 1954, p. 102).

After the Nagpur session, a Hindu journalist Durga Das met Mr. Jinnah. Durga Das records Jinnah saying that "I will have nothing to do with this pseudo-religious approach to politics, I part company with Congress and Gandhi. I do not believe in working up mob hysteria. Politics is a gentleman game" (Das, 2004, p. 227).

Jinnah's first public address following the Nagpur session took place on February 19, 1921, at the Servants of India Society in Poona, an organization originally founded by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. In this speech, he criticized both the British government's policies and Gandhi's non-cooperation strategy, arguing that the nation was being led in a perilous direction. He admitted that he could not reconcile himself with Gandhi's approach, describing it as a spiritual crusade rooted in destructive

tactics wholly incompatible with the temperament of a practical man such as himself (Bolitho, 1954, pp. 103-104).

Jinnah was the one honorable exception. Although he did not agree with Gandhi's Programme, he did respect the feeling it reflected. He even felt that, as the government had behaved abominably, some form of non-cooperation was necessary. Therefore in 1921 when the government approached the leader who were not in favor of the non-cooperation movement, he rebuffed them in the words, Jinnah argued that the non-cooperation movement merely reflected widespread public discontent, stemming from the government's persistent neglect of popular opinion and unresolved grievances(Bolitho, 1954,p. 104). In respect of Congress and Khilafat Committee's decision of boycott of the councils, he did not participate in the elections of legislature council.

Later, Jinnah tried to bring about a rapprochement between Gandhi and Reading. In January 1922, a month before Gandhi actually suspended the movement, Jinnah arranged an All-Parties Conference at Bombay, which condemned government repression, advised the congress to abandon mass *satyagraha*, and recommended the organizing of a round table conference with power to settle *Sawraj* and Khilafat question(Wolpert, 2024, p. 66).

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, along with several other prominent leaders, distanced himself from Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. The campaign gained momentum following the arrest of several of its leaders and participants. However, what began as a peaceful civil disobedience initiative soon escalated, as violence and unrest spread across the country. The Ali Brothers continued to strongly advocate for the Khilafat cause, but growing disorder marked by riots and frequent clashes

with the police confirmed the apprehensions previously voiced by Jinnah and like-minded leaders.

The non-cooperation movement was called off after the Chauri Chaura tragedy on February 5th 1922, in which twenty-two policemen were burnt alive by a violent mob. The Congress negotiated with the government; Pundit Malviya acted as the mediator. The government agreed to let off the civil disobedience prisoners if the Congress called off the boycott. Also a round table conference was to be arranged in March 1922 including the government and Congress.

Jinnah learnt a lot from the khilafat movement. In 1920-21 Gandhi's was the hero of the day, and Jinnah the author of the Lucknow Pact and the champion of moderate politics slipped into oblivion. In 1917-18 Jinnah was the foremost patriot, the most prominent leader simultaneously of the Congress, the Muslims League, the and the Imperial Legislative Council, three years later, he had lost each and every position.

The outcome of the Khilafat Movement left Muhammad Ali Jinnah increasingly disenchanted with both the Indian National Congress and British colonial authorities. This growing disillusionment solidified his conviction that the political interests of Muslims in India required independent representation and protection. Determined to uplift the Muslim community from its state of political demoralization, Jinnah channeled his efforts into revitalizing and reorganizing the All-India Muslim League, positioning it as the principal platform for Muslim political aspirations(Wolpert, 2024, p. 67).

The Diplomatic Advocacy of Aga Khan and Syed Amir Ali

This period also marked a broader transformation in Muslim political consciousness, as concerns regarding the fate of the Ottoman Caliphate and Turkey began to dominate public discourse. The Khilafat Movement ushered in a new era of

Muslim leadership, and in this context, prominent figures such as Sir Aga Khan III emerged to advocate for Muslim interests. Though not aligned with the populist tactics of the Khilafat Movement, Aga Khan lent support through moderate and diplomatic channels. He contributed prolifically by writing articles, addressing British officials through correspondence, and voicing Muslim concerns in British media outlets like the Times (Polak, 1924, pp. 112–115).

Unlike the populist rhetoric of the Ali Brothers, the Aga Khan and Syed Amir Ali adopted a diplomatic and moderate approach. They advocated for Turkey's interests through public letters in the Times and private negotiations with British officials. Though both were criticized and even denounced by Turkish authorities for their efforts, they were instrumental in shaping public opinion and British policy. Their work highlighted the diversity within Muslim leadership and presented an alternative model of political engagement.

Despite ideological differences with the Khilafat leadership, Aga Khan's dedication to the Islamic world remained unwavering. He and Syed Amir Ali worked to influence British public opinion and policymakers, and played a critical role in facilitating financial aid from Indian Muslims to the victims of suffering in Smyrna and other regions of Turkey (Aga Khan III, 1954, pp. 180–183). His efforts to reconcile his loyalty to the West with his devotion to Islam were particularly visible during this politically sensitive period.

Although Aga Khan did not occupy a central position in the mass mobilization of the Khilafat Movement, his behind-the-scenes efforts were widely recognized. His international reputation as a statesman and advocate for peace culminated in a significant moment on February 5, 1924, when the Indian Council of State passed a resolution recommending him for the Nobel Peace Prize. The resolution cited his role in promoting

reconciliation between Turkey and Western powers following the First World War (Aga Khan III, 1954, p. 184; Indian Council of State, 1924).

The Khilafat Movement ultimately failed to realize its central aim, the preservation of the Ottoman Caliphate. In hindsight, the movement proved detrimental to Indian Muslims, erasing the modest gains they had achieved in government employment and educational advancement. It became evident that the Khilafat Committee had underestimated the complexities of the issue, promoting objectives that were neither practical nor entirely defensible within the Indian political context (Qureshi, 1999, pp. 200–202).

While the movement did not significantly influence Turkish politics, it had a lasting effect on India. It intensified internal unrest and introduced theological concepts like Dar-ul-Harb (abode of war) and Dar-ul-Islam (abode of Islam) into the political discourse, ideas that received tacit support from Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. This development planted early seeds of communal division. Although Gandhi had once been venerated by leaders like Maulana Mohammad Ali, who in 1923 compared him to Jesus Christ, their views later shifted. Within a few years, Maulana Mohammad Ali controversially asserted that no matter how virtuous Gandhi might be, from a religious standpoint, he would still regard an irreligious Muslim as superior to him (Mujahid, 1981, p. 59).

Syed Amir Ali, a jurist and intellectual, also played a significant role during this period. He used his influence to advocate for Muslim causes, particularly during World War I, when he organized medical aid for Turkish victims and actively defended Muslim political interests (Aga Khan III, 1954, pp. 180–183). In June 1919, Indian Muslims in England, led by Amir Ali, the Aga Khan, and Sir Abbas Ali Baig, submitted a memorandum to the British Prime Minister requesting that Turkey's territorial

integrity be preserved under the authority of the Sultan(Polak, 1924, pp. 95-97).

Both Sir Aga Khan and Syed Amir Ali published letters in The Times, echoing this plea for Turkish sovereignty. However, their advocacy became controversial after the Turkish government itself abolished the Caliphate in 1924. On November 24, 1923, the two leaders sent a letter to the Turkish authorities detailing Indian Muslims' support for the Caliphate a letter which was leaked to the press in Constantinople before reaching Ankara. The Turkish leadership, especially Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, took offense, perceiving it as unwarranted interference in domestic affairs(Polak, 1924, pp. 121–123).

The backlash was swift. Turkish authorities denounced both leaders as British agents, accusing them of undermining Turkey's national interests. Ismet Pasha went further, publicly rejecting their legitimacy as spokesmen for the Muslim world on the grounds that they were Shia, and therefore unqualified to represent the largely Sunni Turkish population(Polak, 1924, p. 124). Facing heavy criticism, Aga Khan and Amir Ali defended themselves in a published statement in The Times, praising Atatürk's service to his nation while warning that the uncertainty surrounding the Caliphate's future risked destabilizing the unity of the Islamic world(Aga Khan III, 1954, p.184). We want to bring this matter to the notice of the Turkish Assembly and urge that the Caliph's dignity might be placed on an assured position in order to maintain his prestige and command the confidence and esteem of the Sunni world. The letter possibly precipitated the decision of the Turkish National Assembly taken on March 3, 1924 to abolish the Caliphate and to exile Abdul Majid.

This contentious episode nonetheless reflects a positive shift in the political dynamics of Muslim India. Despite being Shia, both the Aga Khan and Syed Amir Ali operated in a political environment where sectarian differences had begun to

lose their significance. This marked a stark contrast to the divisive sectarianism of the eighteenth century, when Sunni-Shia tensions had severely fragmented Muslim unity. The transformation reached its apex during the Pakistan Movement, when Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a Shia himself, led the efforts to establish a separate Muslim state, fully aware that Sunni Muslims would constitute its overwhelming majority (Qureshi, 1999, pp. 210–213).

Although both the Aga Khan and Amir Ali faced criticism from Turkish authorities for their perceived interference in internal matters, they remained steadfast in their efforts to assist Turkey. The Aga Khan, in particular, played an important role during this critical period. A considerable share of Turkey's diplomatic difficulties could be traced to British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, whose coalition government was a significant obstacle to Turkish aspirations. Historical records suggest that the Aga Khan personally contributed to the political downfall of Lloyd George. Journalist Paul Beaver provides detailed accounts of how the Conservative Party's withdrawal of support from Lloyd George's cabinet was influenced by these pressures (Beaver, 1998, pp. 142–145).

Additional reports indicate that the Aga Khan leveraged his influential connections within British political circles to advocate for Turkey. One key example occurred during the tenure of Viceroy Lord Reading, when British authorities were compelled to revise the terms of the Treaty of Sevres to be more favorable to Turkey (Aga Khan III, 1954, p. 190). In 1922, the Government of India sent a dispatch to London supporting the Sultan. Edwin Montagu, then Secretary of State for India, approved its publication. However, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, strongly opposed the move. Under pressure from the fallout, Lloyd George resigned from the cabinet, marking a significant shift in British policy (Aga Khan III, 1954, p. 192).

Sir Stanley Reed, then editor of The Times, later clarified that the origins of the influential dispatch could be traced to the Aga Khan's diplomatic engagement. During a conversation with Viceroy Reading on the political climate in India, the Aga Khan stressed the urgency of addressing Muslim grievances over the draft treaty with Turkey. His recommendations were taken seriously and further discussed by Reading and Sir George Lloyd, the Governor of Bombay, leading to the drafting and dispatching of the official memorandum to London (Reed, 1930, pp. 107–109).

Aftermath and Political Realignment

By 1922, the Khilafat Movement had lost its momentum, especially after the Chauri Chaura incident, which led Gandhi to suspend the non-cooperation movement. Jinnah's marginalization during this period profoundly influenced his political trajectory. Having lost his positions in the Congress, the Muslim League, and the Imperial Legislative Council, he retreated temporarily from politics. However, the experience convinced him that Muslim political interests could not be safeguarded within a Congress-led nationalist framework. He returned with renewed determination to reorganize the Muslim League as an independent platform.

Conclusion

The Khilafat Movement, though initially framed as a campaign for Islamic solidarity and anti-imperial protest, ultimately contributed to a lasting reconfiguration of Muslim political consciousness in British India. Far from achieving its declared aim of preserving the Caliphate, the movement's most enduring impact was the politicization of religious identity and the rise of clerical influence in public life, a development that

continues to shape the politics of both India and Pakistan. Its entanglement with Gandhi's non-cooperation movement temporarily masked but ultimately deepened communal divisions, as the convergence of religious rhetoric and political activism proved to be a fragile and volatile coalition.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah's principled opposition to the Khilafat and non-cooperation campaigns, often misunderstood as communalism, was rooted in his foresight regarding the dangers of injecting religion into politics. His insistence on constitutionalism and rational engagement, though sidelined at the time, later became foundational to the vision of Pakistan he would articulate. Meanwhile, leaders like Aga Khan and Syed Amir Ali demonstrated that Muslim advocacy could be pursued through moderate diplomacy rather than mass agitation, though their efforts were often met with criticism, both in India and abroad.

In retrospect, the Khilafat Movement marked both a high point of pan-Islamic idealism and the beginning of modern Muslim political fragmentation. It sowed the ideological seeds that would later blossom into Muslim separatism, and its legacy, though contested, remains central to understanding the complex interplay between religion, nationalism, and identity in South Asian history.

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