

Understanding Nationalism with Abul Kalam Azad and Said Nursi

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Abstract

Nationalism – a European exported phenomenon – traces its roots from 18th and 19th Century and is an outcome of the modern period. But its instincts and elements can be traced to the annals of history where a strong attachment to the motherland, traditions and territory is found. Defining Nationalism per se seems difficult and so does its application as it has taken many forms and expressions across time and space. However, the concept and its meaning can be understood by its history. Nationalism has been a subject of academicians of both Muslims and non-Muslim intellectuals alike. The Muslim response to nationalism throughout the history was of two forms. Both of these were devoted to explicate the true nature of nationalism and direct its refutation in the light of the contemporary discourses. This paper will attempt to focus on the stance of the Turkish thinker Said Nursi (1876-1960) and the Indian scholar Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) vis-a-vis nationalism.

Key Words: Said Nursi – Abul Kalam Azad – Muslim Response – Nationalism

Introduction

Nationalism is derived from its root word “nation” which comes from the Latin verb “*nasci* – to be born,” which actually refers to a group of persons born in the same place. European Universities used this word for the students who came from the same region or country, in the middle ages.¹ In other words, it is a Latin word “nation”, “*natus*”, or “*nastro*” which means the birth or race or to be born² and originally means a group of people born at the same place, whether that place is thought of as a few dozens or many thousands of square miles.³ The word nation came into existence since the overall development of the civilization has taken place. ‘Nation’ denotes the oneness of people in a definite territory having same origin, history, culture, language and religion. As Smith defines nation as a group of human population having common historical territory, myths, memories, economy, legal rights and duties, and a public culture were being as the member of that particular group.⁴

Nationalism is a state of mind and manifestation of some ideological goals that are to be realized with collective efforts.⁵ The famous scholar Hayes (1882-1964) defined it as; the fusion and exaggeration of two phenomena – nationality and patriotism.⁶

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Ernest Gellner states that, “nations can be defined only in the age of nationalism,”⁷ “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”⁸ The sentiments, loyalty, love and belongingness which binds the people together under a common institution and unites them in a single society or nation is called as nationalism. It comprises of several elements which makes strong bonding between the groups of people like common race, language, traditions, past historical achievements of common ancestry, works of art, political ideologies and propaganda, some other factors like common history, geography, religion and economy helps in developing the ideology of nationalism. But individually none of the single factor is enough to form a nation or nationalism.⁹ The primitive societies which were based on democratic ideologies focused on the liberal nationalism. While as the communist and fascist ideologies adopted the new wave of nationalism i.e., integral nationalism, which aimed at the expansion of territory, protecting the economic and trade interests of a nation. They adopt the policies seeking more national interests.¹⁰

Modern nationalism which emerged in Europe in 17th and 18th centuries became a general European movement in the 19th century.¹¹ It was one of the explosive political philosophies in the 20th century as it overruled all the ideologies today. Nationalism as a political ideology is a recent development in nationalism but its roots go back to distant history. Two historic movement French Revolution in the 18th century and anti-colonial movement of 20th century have taken place, where national ideas gained universal recognition and spread from France to other Europe countries as well as in Asia, Africa and the Colonial world. With the onset of French revolution the ‘nationalism’ climbed its epitome and in new phenomenon, prior to that we only found some expressions of national sentiments and loyalty of citizens. The nation-state concept emerged in the era of industrial revolution. Due to the formation of new nations, the concept of nationalism gained its importance.¹² Hans Kohan (1891-1971) was of the view that the, “nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness, which since the French Revolution has become more and more common to mankind.”¹³ Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016) says that the national identity is more fundamental and inclusive than all other identities like race, class, religion, gender, etc. of a person. Nationalism as an ideology reached every corner of the globe and the nation-state concept drove the popular sovereignty and democracy.¹⁴ He characterized twentieth century nationalism as separatist nationalism, racial nationalism, communist nationalism, fascist nationalism, liberal nationalism, conservative nationalism, traditionalist nationalism and pan

nationalism.¹⁵ He defines the three main goals; citizen autonomy, territorial unity and historical identity for inspiring the nationalist movements.¹⁶

Impact of Nationalism on Muslim World

Muslim societies were politically transformed and they developed the concept of *Ummah* and looked for *Khilāfah* as a symbol of unity avoiding the discrimination on regional and racial grounds. Muslim scholars and students round the globe assembled in the learning centers, open for all Muslims, which strengthened the notion of *Ummah*.¹⁷ Interactions with others made them aware of the conditions and developments of other Muslim regions. They discussed the problems and issues prevailing then in the Muslim world and tried to come up with the possible solutions. Muslim societies were transformed in diverse ways in various countries which affected Muslims all over the world. Apart from this, the trade routes running through the Muslim regions also provided a link to interact with Muslims of other regions.¹⁸ This concept was replaced by a western concept of nationalism in the colonial era that gave rise to the concept of state (defined on the basis of language, culture and geography) that at length affected the Muslim world. This nationalism divided the *Ummah* on the basis of races and regions which gave rise to various countries, nations and states in the Muslim world.¹⁹

Arabic was the *lingua franca* of the Muslim world being the language of the divine scripture – the Qur'an, commonly taught, and a medium of interaction in the Muslim world. It was replaced by the colonial masters with their own language as a result Arabic became a foreign language to those who were not the usual speakers hence, made the revelation and traditional knowledge inaccessible to them.²⁰

Traditional system of education was governed by the principles of *Tawhīd*, the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. Beliefs like Creation of universe and Day of Judgement were not open to questioning. Knowledge was not linked with the jobs in the administrative system but acquired for being a religious obligation.²¹ This system of education was replaced by the western system that, allowed free thinking and inquiry and was linked with the jobs in the new administrative set up, produced a generation of those educated men and women with little knowledge and far from their faith. They served in the administration to implement the colonial agenda and saw the purpose of education as a means of a good job.²² Education was institutionalized and the centers were unable to train (*tarbiyyah*) the students which resulted in the division between the body and the soul. The faculties were nourished and developed which were confined to the body thus completely related to the fulfillment of physical

needs.²³ The introduction of the western political system replaced the dynastic system in the colonies and a new system of governance evolved which still prevails.²⁴

Social setup in the Muslim societies also underwent a change. The mass migration of the rural people into cities for the employment resulted in rapid urbanization. The work too became unavailable in the cities due to the growing unemployment with the passage of time. It led to the breakdown of the social fabric as men folk left home in search of work and the women were forced into single parenthood and burdened with running the family alone.²⁵ Man has turned individualistic, selfish, and materialistic and developed utilitarian attitude.²⁶ Thus colonialism came with an onslaught on economic, political and social dimensions of the Muslim world which influenced the developments in the Muslim world. From the end of the nineteenth century, Muslims tried to understand how their society plunged into deep despair and subjugation from the heights of culture and learning.²⁷

Azad's Nationalism

The great champion of Hindu-Muslim unity and integrity of India, Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) has been a noted Muslim intellectual of the twentieth century. He started his education at Makkah and was tutored by his father Maulana Kahiruddin in the Islamic sciences. His family returned to India in 1898²⁸ where he first came across the writings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and was greatly impressed by his modern education thought.²⁹ Later he established contacts with Shibli Numani (1857-1914) and was exposed to the reformist writings of Egyptian scholars like Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935).³⁰

Azad had very clear views about religion and nationalism. He accepted nationalism in his own way. He does not seem nationalism as averse to his religion. He considered Hindu-Muslim unity and brotherhood as supreme, which contributed to build up a composite Indian culture since distant past. He was of the view that, Islam neither negates nationalism nor nationalism in its actual sense limits Islamic perception. This concept has been unduly exaggerated, however the reality lies between the two not on either extreme.³¹ While defining nationalism he said, "It is the concept for a special state of man's collective consciousness and a notion of social order. It distinguishes one group of people from another and makes it possible for a large number of them to come together to lead their lives and undertake their collective responsibilities."³²

Azad talked about the emergence of nationalism in the world, which begin with the natural affinity for the place of birth because of the three broad reasons. First is the physical condition of the place which suits and develops attractiveness for him. Second is the experience which consistently influenced his consciousness. Thirdly, the affections emerged towards affiliations of race and kinship with every nook and corner at the place where he born and brought up.³³ Azad related country with humanity and not with any particular religion. He said,

*Today eleven centuries have gone. Islam holds the same right over India as does Hinduism. If the inhabitants of this country profess Hinduism for many thousand years, Islam too is people's religion here for a thousand years. Like a Hindu declaring proudly that he is an Indian, follow Hinduism, so also we can say with equal pride that we are Indian and follow Islam. I would like to express it in wider terms that Indian Christians too have the right to say with pride that they are Indians and they believe in Christianity.*³⁴

According to Azad patriotism is the budding of one's affiliation with the city-state. Due to the evolution and expansion of civilizations city-state concept starts to widen. Instead of thinking about his place of birth the consciousness broadened and the patriotism encompassed the entire country. This collective consciousness unified the masses into a one single unit which includes different tribes and races. The nationalism follows patriotism in the next stage of social consciousness. This consciousness continued till the final stage of evolution reached which was the stage of Humanism and Universalism. At this stage the human's realized that the boundaries and affiliations were not actual and natural. The true relationship is that the entire earth is a native land of all human beings and belonged to one family are like brothers.³⁵ When Islam was born in Arab the entire population was an accumulation of tribes. The tribes were restrained within the domain of its racial nationalism and the grievous passions of pride were deeply strong in their minds. The chauvinism which was first based on Arabism, i.e. the Arabs are superior to non-Arabs and among themselves each tribe had the pride of racial superiority over the other. Islam denied all these racial superiority and affiliations which were created by the limitations of human knowledge and perceptions. It called human beings towards humanism and natural bonds of brotherhood. The mankind which divided into different areas and groups, scattered all over the world was for the introduction to make them distinct from another. These units were meant for introduction like, he is an African, he is an Arab, he is an Aryan and he is Mongolian etc. was

only to recognized the distinct groups. But there were no distinctions in this classification; the real distinction was one's deeds and endeavors. The Qur'ānic teaching clearly declares the unity of mankind, however, the differences which prevailed is the result of negligence and spinning away from the righteous path of Islam.³⁶

Azad states that the main four hurdles in the path of universalism and human brotherhood; race, color, country and language where if not completely vanished but restricted by Islam. It leaves no room to these affiliations and proclaimed that all belong to one race; no Arabi has any superiority over Ajami; and the different languages and colors are the signs of God's wisdom and power. The protection and prejudices of race and nation are the two aspects of chauvinism and Islam is opposed to prejudices not to protection. In the beginning a group of people created their own orbit of patriotism and nationalism for protect themselves from external invasion, i.e. the defensive nationalism. When this kind of nationalism continued for period of time gave birth to national superiority and pride and suddenly turned into jingoism. This transformation results the violence between the different nations and the humanism becomes dormant. But Islam dejected this emergence of narrow orbits.³⁷

The idea of nationalism existed since ages but emerged in the era of European civilization which was for the defence of human rights and liberty. Azad believed that the nationalism of Europe turned a great threat to human rights and liberty in the times of colonial era and Europe took a new turn. On one side the knowledge and liberty spread all over Europe but on the other their despotism and tyranny over the foreign dominations. The national organizations which were formed on the basis of equality and liberty become itself its hindrances. The concern of human liberty and mankind became as far away from them as it was before. The capitalism forced and dominated over people through money power and intercession of world peace, thus, the destination of the countries fall in their hands. The reorganization of the world social order and unfettered human brotherhood became the significant and interesting areas of thought. So far as to establish peace and reform nationalism is concerned, it is essential to act according to the teachings of Islam.³⁸

Nationalism in India is of recent origin, formulated to revive and reform the attitude of Indian minds. It is the collective consciousness and recognition of the socio-cultural unity and operated as a device to letting out the British colonialism. Due to the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885, proved a milestone in the history of the growth of nationalism in

India. As being the part of Indian National Congress, Azad's political thought was dominated by Indian nationalism. The nationalism of Azad was based on three ingredients; Swaraj, Communal harmony and non-violence. He called people in the struggle to devastate the remnants of imperialism under the banner of Indian National Congress.³⁹ In 1940, when Azad takes over as the President of Indian National Congress, he remarked that, "Today we need neither any Hindu organization nor any Muslim organization. What we need is a singular and unique organization that is Indian National Congress."⁴⁰

Azad in his clear stand about the Indian nationalism that has been framed naturally and bears the stamp of fortune. He was of the view that either Muslims accept or reject it, but it is a hard fact that Muslims are a part of the Indian nation, which is devoid of division. Muslims of India should accept this natural verdict and focus in making their future.⁴¹

Nursi's Nationalism

Nursi (1876-1960), one of the great Islamic thinkers of the 20th Century, appeared in the academics only in the recent years. Likewise the Western academia, Nursi was somehow ignored by the scholars of Turkish Republic. He was troubled about the deterioration of religious zeal that had filled the spirit of Muslims in Turkey for centuries. As an exceptional personality and sharp intelligence he lived in a transitional phase of modern world and witnessed the significant events of the world history and even participated in them like the two Great Wars and Collapse of Ottoman Empire. He realized the transformation in the fields of politics and education. In the early decades of the 20th century, the decline of the Islamic world had made the Ottomans unable to defend themselves not only physically against imperialist advance but also intellectually against Western attacks. With the onslaught of secularism religious schools and Sufi meetings were closed down. Nursi played a significant role among all these changes and adopted a new methodology to adjust with them. He tried to unite people of faith against atheism. He stood against Westernization spread of atheistic thoughts and inadequate religious education. The people awakening in Asia imitated Europe in every aspect, embraced the idea of nationalism at the cost of their sacred matters.⁴² The idea of nationalism in this period, Nursi agreed, has so developed that no one can say 'give up the idea of nationalism' to those who are interested in social life.⁴³

Nursi emphasized throughout his life on the prevention of fragmentation of the Muslim world. The strongest bond of the Muslim world, according to Nursi, is none other than Islam itself. Nursi believed brotherhood to be the key and established as a Divine

command rather than for any political means. The obstacle to Muslim unity was the East's imitation of the Western nations. Nursi criticized the Asian countries for imitating those unqualified models and institutions from the West which prove detrimental to the Muslim unity. Nationalism was such an institution which had devastated the concept of *Ummah* in the Muslim world. Nursi categorized Nationalism into two categories; positive (*müsbet*) and negative (*menfi*). Positive nationalism, as Nursi says, emerges from the need for social cohesion and is a basis for mutual assistance, solidarity and strengthens Islamic brotherhood. Positive nationalism should function as citadel and armor of Islam and remain subservient to it.⁴⁴ If it takes the place of Islam then there will be nothing just and right.⁴⁵ For preservice of brotherhood and unity, Nursi observes, one should love fellow members of one's group and avoid the notion of superiority. The division of groups should lead to mutual acquaintance and assistance rather than antipathy and mutual hostility. The movements based on the racial superiority are meaningless and detrimental to the society, as Nursi said that, likewise one cannot choose his parents, he cannot choose his color or race. As far as negative nationalism is concerned, Nursi regards it detrimental because of its hostility, enmity, chaos and devouring others that wreaks havoc. 'Its mark is ghastly clashes, disastrous collisions and their result, annihilation,' maintains Nursi, as shown in the form of Great War.⁴⁶ Nursi says, there is no place for such nationalism which gives birth to racial disparity and holds religion subservient to race. Nursi views negative nationalism and racialism as the fatal poison and a type of European disease.⁴⁷ The three identified obstacles to human progress; ignorance, poverty and conflict and Nursi regards negative nationalism as a 'societal egoism' and a cause of conflict between the Muslims.⁴⁸ He accuses Europeans of awakening this (nationalism) among Muslims in a negative fashion in order to divide and devour them.⁴⁹ Nursi warns, "O Turkish brother! Especially you be careful! Your nationality is blended with Islam and is inseparable from it. If you separate it you are ruined. All your glory has been written in the book of Islam."⁵⁰ Muslims, during this time, are in need of one another due to oppression and poverty but due to the idea of nationalism we consider one another as strangers and are crushed under the European domination.⁵¹ The solution, Nursi believed, was the degeneration of the nationalistic feeling and uniting all Muslims under the umbrella of Islam. Nursi maintains, one should work to establish Islamic brotherhood and unity for societal change. It seems that Nursi supported the ideas of Pan-Islamism of Jamal al-Din Afghani rather than promoting the western notions of nationalism.⁵²

Conclusion

Nationalism had a long lasting impact on the whole Muslim world. Changes occurred in the socio-political, educational, economic and lingual realms. In Indian context nationalism has remained oscillating since the colonial period with some scholars treating it as the “shroud of religion” while as others reconciling it with Islam. Keeping in view the heterogeneous nature of Indian society, Muslims constitute the largest minority in India, need to have a clear understanding of nationalism. In this connection, as explained above, the significance of Azad’s views regarding nationalism becomes all the more manifest for he provides an efficient model for Muslims to celebrate nationalism while remaining loyal to Islam. On the other hand, Nursi remarks that in this era of nationalism, no can claim alienation from it. However, he defines nationalism in two perspectives; negative and positive. Nursi holds religion (Islam) as superior spectrum to conjunct Muslim world over the traits of nationalism (color, race, language, territory). Nursi gives a place to positive aspect of nationalism which preserves unity and brotherhood and the negative has no place for it promotes racial disparity.

- Religion surpasses the nationalism boundaries as the former is universal in nature.
- Nationalism has limited role to play in the modern world as the concept of nation-state is in vogue.
- Nationalism has divided the human family in fragments thus preventing the use of collective human experience.
- Nationalism prioritises national interests over collective human family interests.
- Yet nationalism preserves and continues the traditions, race, culture, language, of a nation.

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