

Book Review

Non-violent Activism in Islam: Message of Abul Kalam Azad

by Hayat Alvi, Lexington Books, 2021

In the contemporary times, Islam is discussed from different and diverse perspectives and is broadly debated and interpreted through two main prisms: fundamentalist/ extremist/ violent interpretations and the reformist/ liberal/ non-violent version. Though in the post-9/11 world, it is the extremist trend and violent activism that has seen a proliferation through the debates, discussions and in the form of scholarly and analytical works, but the fact is that the reformist trend and the non-violent activism is no less significant.

A number of prominent voices, both in the past as well as in the present times, have devoted their time and energy in highlighting the non-violent activism vis-à-vis Islam and Islamic tradition. One such prominent and renowned figure from the Sub-continent is Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958): a renowned Muslim scholar, journalist, political leader and educationist. Though in most of the writings on him, his role as a freedom fighter/ political leader, journalist, religious scholar or the Quranic exegete is discussed and highlighted, but a significant aspect of his life and thought is his role as a propagator, preacher, and practitioner of non-violent activism—an aspect of his multidimensional personality in which he was highly influenced by the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and his practice of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (civil disobedience).

The book under review, written by Hayat Alvi (Associate Professor in the *National Security Affairs Department* at the *U.S. Naval War College*, USA), “tells the story and explains the Islamic legal precedent of the nonviolent civil disobedience that Mualana Azad undertook in the face of British repression” (p. ix).

Consisting of five (5) main chapters, excluding Introduction and Conclusion, the main purpose of Alvi’s book is to ‘illustrate the legal basis for nonviolent activism in Islam’, as propounded, practiced, promoted, and exemplified by Maulana Azad with the hope that contemporary leaders and activists can learn lessons from his example, which ‘can be an argument against blind dogma, extremism, and militancy in the modern era’. In other words, Alvi highlights and discusses the nonviolent activism (NVA) of Azad as an anecdote or a remedial measure for the Islamist extremist interpretations of Islam in the current times.

Alvi is a staunch “Gandhian”, and by that way a staunch supporter and follower of Azad’s NVA, and is fed up with the “spread of intolerant, militant ideologies (both secular and religious) that inspire acts of violence” (p. viii) or with the “militant interpretations of Islam” and has thus focused on, and given attention to, the “*nonviolent* interpretations of

Islam, especially in the context of political activism in the pursuit of social justice” (p. viii; italics in original).

In other words, the book intends to provide, as Alvi puts it, “a counterargument to violent Islamist extremism/ *jihadism* by means of educating the reader about Islam’s nonviolent principles and how they can be used to fight against Islamist extremism and militancy” (p. 16; italics in original).

Her work makes a substantial contribution due to two main reasons: (i) mostly Azad’s ideas about nationalism, educational philosophy, religio-political thought, Quranic exegesis are the aspects which have been given much importance and hype in most of the writings on Azad; and (ii) most of the current scholarship on Islam is devoted to the extremist interpretations of Islam, or political Islam, and thus NVA (reformist and liberal interpretations) find little space. Thus, Alvi rightly argues that focusing on building awareness about “nonviolent aspects of Islam in today’s environment is equally invaluable” (p. 16). Alvi puts forth the focus, purpose and objective of the book very boldly as:

The focus of this book is the moral, religious, and judicial comparisons between Maulana Azad's endorsement (as renowned Islamic jurisprudential authority) of nonviolent activism in the Islamic context—which provides the legal and theological precedents—and the violent acts and beliefs of Islamist extremists, which are immoral and unjust particularly in targeting innocent civilians, and hence un-Islamic, despite their rigorous claims (p. 16).

Below is provided brief description of each chapter followed by summary of the major arguments in the conclusion:

“Introduction” (pp. 1-19) provides a brief outline of the current trends in Islamic thought; background of the NVA within Islamic purview, as outlined, understood and interpreted by Azad; brief profile of Azad; and purpose, focus and outline of the book.

Chapter 1, “Abul Kalam Azad: Who Was He?” (pp. 21-47), delves deep into Azad’s life, thought/ ideas, his principles of NVA in the context of his “rational” interpretation of Islam, and his role as a leader of Indian Muslims in the freedom movement. Alvi describes Azad as a “man of principle”: “His pragmatism aligned with the Congress Party’s demands for an independent, United, secular India”; and most importantly, “Azad embraced and practiced Mahatma Gandhi’s strategy of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *satyagraha* (civil disobedience), which, in turn, solidifies Islam’s compatibility with nonviolent activism” (p. 43).

Chapter 2, “The Concept of Justice, *Zulm*, and *Mazlum* in Islam” (pp. 49-68), presents a detailed description of the concepts of ‘*Adl* (justice), *Zulm* (oppression), *Mazlum* (one who is oppressed), and violent persecution of the early converts to Islam and then establishes linkages between those historical concepts and events and the pro-independence movement

against British in India, with a focus on Azad's thoughts and practices. Here Alvi argues that through his “proactive civil disobedience, selflessness, and tenacious persistence”, Azad not only illustrated compatibility of NVA with Islam but also insisted the “Indian Muslims to adopt the same methods to oust the British Raj” (p. 66).

Chapter 3, “The Islamic Principles of Social Justice: From Maulana Azad to the Arab Awakening” (pp. 69-88), discusses in detail the Islamic principles of social justice by examining its historical context, beginning with early Islamic history, followed by the period of British colonial rule and the Indian struggle against it, and “analyses the principles of Maulana Azad in the struggle against injustice, and how that compares to the principles and practices of violent Islamist militancy and jihadism” (p. 69). It discusses “Historical Background and Key Concepts of Violent Islamist Militancy” (pp. 73-79) by focusing on the Kharijites as a group of “Puritanical Fanaticism” (pp. 76-77), the “Sunni-Shi’ite Rivalry” (pp. 77-79) and lastly on the “2011 Arab Awakening” (pp. 79-81). It concludes that (i) “Azad’s teachings, principles, and nonviolent activism shoulder-to-shoulder with Mahatma Gandhi illustrate the effectiveness of nonviolent action in fighting oppression and injustice” (pp. 81-82); (ii) Azad, in the capacity of being a religious authority, not only “declared nonviolent activism as wholly compatible with Islam” but “stamped [it] with legal legitimacy” as well (p. 82); and (iii) “Maulana Azad abided by moderation, reasoning, intellectual discourse, in Islam, and *ijtihad*, and he always emphasized the importance of education that promotes these concepts and disciplines” (p. 85).

Alvi makes a comparative analysis of the “Islamist Extremism” and Azad’s principles of nonviolence, pluralism, peaceful co-existence, and secular democracy, in chapter 4 (pp. 89-120). It discusses the “Rise of ISIS” (pp. 90-93); “The ‘ISIS Solution’ to Muslim Humiliation” (pp. 93-102); “The Utility of Violent Jihad in International Relations and how it has been Backed” (pp. 102-110); and impact of “Political Islam on the Subcontinent” (pp. 110-116). In these discussions, Alvi attempts to compare and contrast Azad’s “principles of nonviolence to those of the most violent and puritanical Islamist extremists” (p. 89) and reaches the conclusion that “Azad believed in religious unity and coexistence”, and was thus “at heart not only a ‘Maulana,’ but also a dedicated pro-independence Indian nationalist, Mahatma Gandhi’s right-hand Muslim leader, and a loyal, selfless and diligent nonviolent activist” (p. 117).

In the context of discussions made in previous chapters, chapter 5 is devoted to the “Implications of Nonviolent Islam for Peace and Security” (pp. 121-135) as the literature on “the violent interpretations of Islam and *jihadism*” is in abundance, while as “there is insufficient literature about nonviolent Islamic activism” (p. 121). That is, “the concept of nonviolent activism is frequently eclipsed by its streams of violent extremism” (p. 121). It is in this context that Alvi highlights the nonviolent philosophy and activism of Azad, arguing that his “precedent of rendering nonviolent civil disobedience compatible with Islam” needs

to be highlighted as it has the potential to “pull the rug from underneath the violent Islamist extremism” (pp. 121-22). Referring to the calls of Azad, Abdul Ghafar Khan (*aka* Frontier Gandhi), and Gandhi on achieving “political unity” between Hinduism and Islam, nonviolence, “unity within Islam” (by refuting “sectarianism”), and for “unity between as well as within religions” (p. 130, 131), Alvi concludes that the “disciplines of nonviolent activism in fighting against tyranny, injustices, and oppressions has succeeded in achieving justice without violence and insatiable revenge” (pp. 132-33). Alvi further states:

Maulana Azad and like-minded Muslims have spoken against sectarian rivalries, and they have encouraged peaceful co-existence and unity within Islam. The Islamist extremists of all sectarian shades and orientations only perpetuate violence against fellow Muslims. Nothing is more counterproductive to the essence of Islam and its provisions for social justice. Maulana Azad understood and promoted that essence of Islam, and his message for unity between and within religions and his nonviolent activism for achieving justice are all proven formulas for peace, security, and stability. These are also ideal formulas to employ in conflict resolution (p. 132).

With reference to Azad’s relevance in the 21st century, Alvi refers to the case of Tunisia and its “commitment to nonviolent conflict resolution, reconciliation, and negotiations and dialogues with different political parties” which resulted in earning the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize: “This has been a distinguished example of Maulana Azad’s principles of nonviolent activism applied in the twenty-first century, and, that too in a volatile region” (pp. 133-34).

The book ends with seven-pages ‘Conclusion’ (pp. 137-143), and the main arguments put forth by Alvi are summarized below:

- Azad, through his preaching and practice of fighting nonviolently against oppression and injustice, provided the blueprint for employing “ammunition to disarm violent Islamist extremism worldwide” (p. 137)
- Azad’s personal example in the “struggle against injustice under the British Raj is a prime model for nonviolent activists to follow for exacting justice and eliminating oppression” (Ibid.).
- Azad, as a religious scholar, possessed many attributes and beliefs, including firm belief in inter- and intra-Islamic unity, pluralism, and secular democracy.
- Azad set the religio-legal precedent in modern history of Islam for “nonviolent civil disobedience” by strongly counterarguing against “violent jihadism and Islamist extremism”, and thus his principles and message can be “used in any struggle against violent Islamist extremism” (pp. 137-38).

- “Azad’s moderate orientation in Islamic teachings and nonviolent practices” are much helpful in reversing the current “negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims” (p. 139).
- Azad and his like-minded figures, like Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jr., have found “inspiration for nonviolent activism from their respective faiths”, and their “faith-based messages to the masses proved effective in mobilising them to participate in their respective morally credible causes” (p. 139).
- The “Nonviolent activism usually results in conflict resolution and changes in laws and policies toward more just social and legal codes”, whereas “violent conflicts” cause terrible violence having negative consequences on all aspects of human life, thus it is rightly said that everyone “benefits from nonviolent activism” and every life of aspect is affected by violent conflicts (p. 141).
- Azad’s idea and practice of nonviolence refutes the argument of the “violent Islamist extremists” that “oppression has to be countered with violent jihad” (p. 141).
- Narrating and relating the story of Azad is one of the most effective of ways to release Islam from the “trappings of the extremists” who have “hijacked” Islam in the current times (p. 142).
- “Azad stood for Hindu-Muslim unity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence”; criticized intra-Islamic schisms; detested *Taqlid* (blind imitation) and advocated *Ijtihad* (reinterpretation); acknowledged and appreciated the “potential impacts of modernization on Islam, and the fact that Muslims need to adjust to changing times” (Ibid.).
- “Maulana Azad is a proof that nonviolent activism in Islam exists with full legitimacy and offers the formula for successful conflict resolution, as well as the greater likelihood for peace, tolerance, and security for all” (p. 143).

Alvi’s *Nonviolent Activism in Islam*, thus, presents a “convincing religious (Islamic) argument supporting nonviolent activism with ample evidence and historical examples, serving as ideological and intellectual ammunition against violent Islamist extremism and militancy” (p. 142). Azad, “a highly respected religious authority and historical figure”, not only adopted and practised nonviolence and civil disobedience (Gandhi’s principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha), but his “embrace and implementation of these concepts and strategies indicate that they are wholly compatible with Islam” (pp. 142, 143).

Azad’s adoption and practice of nonviolent activism is indeed an “exceedingly important mission” which provides “the blueprint for moral courage and credibility in the face of injustices and oppression” (p. 143).

Overall the theme and subject-matter of Alvi's book—appended by pictures/ images and Azad's speeches (both in original Urdu and translations in English)—touches upon a crucial and significant issue which needs to be given more space amid the 'extremist' atmosphere so that a real picture of Islam is presented. Alvi needs to be given credit and appreciation for highlighting nonviolent activists, both in theory and practice through historical events (especially with reference to Azad), and for highlighting the relevance of nonviolent activism in the 21st century—a century of extremism, violence, protests, and uprisings.

In sum, Alvi's *Nonviolent Activism in Islam* is a significant work which presents a positive, tolerant, and peace-loving picture of Islam in a scenario which is inundated with negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. A remarkable work, it is a must read for students and scholars interested in nonviolent activism in Islam.

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