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Role of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as President of the Indian national congress

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Abstract---Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin Ahmed bin Khairuddin Al-Hussaini Azad (11th November 1888 – 22 February 1958) was an Indian independence activist, Islamic theologian, writer and a senior leader of the Indian National Congress. Following India's independence, he became the First Minister of Education in the Indian government. He is commonly remembered as Maulana Azad; the word Maulana is an honorific meaning 'Our Master' and he had adopted *Azad (Free)* as his pen name. His contribution to establishing the education foundation in India is recognised by celebrating his birthday as National Education Day across India.

Keywords---communal harmony, Presidentship, recognised minorities.

Introduction

Become Congress President

The War broke in Europe on 3 September 1939. Before the month was over, Poland lay prostrate under German arms. To add to the misery of the Poles, the Soviet Union had occupied the eastern half of their territories. Once Polish military resistance was crushed, an uneasy lull descended on Europe. France and Germany faced one another across their fortified frontiers, but large scale hostilities were suspended. Everybody seemed to be waiting for something to happen, but their formless fears were vague and undefined. In India also there was a sense of expectancy and fear. Against this uncertain and threatening background, the question of the Congress Presidentship assumed a new importance. Maulana Abul kalam Asad had been pressed to accept the office in the previous year, but had for various reasons declined. Maulana Abul kalam Asad felt that the present occasion was different and Maulana Abul kalam Asad would be failing in my duty if Maulana Abul kalam Asad again refused. Maulana Abul kalam Asad have already indicated my differences with Gandhiji on the question of India's participation in the war. Maulana Abul kalam Asad felt that

now that war had started, India must have no hesitation in aligning herself with the democratic powers. The question, however, was: how could India fight for others' freedom when she was in bondage herself? If the British Government made an immediate declaration of India's independence, it would become the duty of all Indians to sacrifice everything for the cause of democracy. Maulana Abul kalam Asad therefore felt that in the crisis of the war, it was his duty to serve in any capacity to which Maulana Abul kalam Asad was called. When Gandhiji again requested me to become Congress President, Maulana Abul kalam Asad readily agreed.

There was no real contest for the Presidential election, and the candidate who stood against him was defeated by an overwhelming majority. The session met at Ramgarh and passed a resolution which largely reflected the views Maulana Abul kalam Asad had expressed in his Presidential address. The resolution runs as follows: This Congress having considered the grave and critical situation, resulting from the war in Europe and British policy in regard to it, approves of and endorses the resolutions passed and the action taken on the war situation by the AICC and the Working Committee, The Congress considers the declaration by the British Government, of India as a belligerent country, without any reference to the people of India, and the exploitation of India's resources in this war, as an affront to them, which no self-respecting and freedom-loving people can accept or tolerate. The recent pronouncements made on behalf of the British Government in regard to India demonstrate that Great Britain is carrying on the War fundamentally for imperialist ends and for the preservation and strengthening of her Empire, which is based on the exploitation of the people of India, as well as of other Asiatic and African countries. Under these circumstances, it is clear that the Congress cannot in any way, directly or indirectly, be party to the War, which means continuance and perpetuation of this exploitation. The Congress therefore strongly disapproves of Indian troops being made to fight for Great Britain and of the drain from India of men and material for the purpose of the War. Neither the recruiting nor the money raised in India can be considered to be voluntary contributions from India. Congressmen, and those under the Congress influence, cannot help in the prosecution of the War with men, money or material.

The Congress hereby declares again that nothing short of complete independence can be accepted by the people of India. Indian freedom cannot exist within the orbit of imperialism, and dominion or any other status within the imperial structure is wholly inapplicable to India, is not in keeping with the dignity of a great nation, and would bind India in many ways to British policies and economic structure. The people of India alone can properly shape their own constitution and determine their relations to the other countries of the world, through a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult suffrage,

The Congress is further of the opinion that while it will always be ready, as it ever has been, to make every effort to secure communal harmony, no permanent solution is possible except through a Constituent Assembly, where the rights of all recognised minorities will be fully protected by agreement, as far as possible, between the elected representatives of various majority and minority groups, or by arbitration if agreement is not reached on any point. Any alternative will lack finality. India's constitution must be based on independence, democracy and

national unity, and the Congress repudiates attempts to divide India or to split up her nationhood. The Congress has always aimed at a constitution where the fullest freedom and opportunities of development are guaranteed to the group and the individual, and social injustice yields place to the juster social order. One of Maulana Abul kalam Asad first tasks on taking over the Presidentship from Dr Rajendra Prasad was to reconstitute the Working Committee.

Ten members were common, namely,

1. Shrimatt Sarojini Naidu,
2. SardarbVallabhbbhaiPatel,
3. SethJamnalalBajaj(Treasurer),
4. ShriJ.B.Kripalani(GeneralSecretary),
5. Khan Abdul Gaftar Khan,
6. ShriBhulabhaiDesai,
7. ShriShankar Rao Deo,
8. DrProfullaChandraGhosh,
9. DrRajendraPrasadand and
10. Maulana Abul kalam Asad

One of the conspicuous absentees in Dr Rajendra Prasad's Committee had been Jawaharlal Nehru. Maulana Abul kalam Asad brought him back and added Shri C.Rajagopalachari ,Dr SyedMahmudandMrAsaf Ali. A fifteenth name was to be announced later, but soon after the session of the Congress, we were arrested and the place remained vacant for a long time.

It was a very critical time in the history of the Congress. We were affected by the world shaking events outside. Even more disturbing was the difference among ourselves. Maulana Abul kalam Asad was the Congress President and sought to take India into the camp of the democracies if only she was free. The cause of democracy was one for which India felt strongly. The only obstacle in our way was India's bondage. For Gandhiji, however, it was not so. For him the issue was one of pacifism and not of India's freedom. Maulana Abul kalam Asad declared openly that the Indian National Congress was not a pacifist organisation but an instrument for achieving India's freedom. To Maulana Abul kalam Asad mind therefore the issue raised by Gandhiji was irrelevant.

Gandhiji would not, however, change his views. He was convinced that India ought to remain aloof from the war. He met the Viceroy and expressed these views to him. He also wrote an open letter to the British people appealing to them that they should not fight Hitler but oppose him by spiritual force. It is not altogether surprising that Gandhiji's appeal found no response in British hearts, for by this time France had already fallen and German power stood at its zenith.

This was a very difficult time for Gandhi. Gandhiji saw that the War was devastating the world and he could do nothing to prevent it. He was so distressed that on several occasions he even spoke of suicide. He told me that if he way powerless to stop the suffering caused by the war, he could at least refuse to be a witness to it by putting an end to his life. He pressed me again and again to lend support to his views. Maulana Abul kalam Asad thought over the matter deeply

but he could not bring myself to agree. For me non-violence was a matter of policy, not of creed. Maulana Abul kalam Asad view was that Indians had the right to take to the sword if they wished but in the circumstances which obtained in the country, Gandhiji's method was right. "Our decision to fight non-violently was therefore compelled by circumstances. It was not a matter of creed for me and for many other Indians. If freedom could be obtained by fighting, we would certainly participate in the war.

The Congress Working Committee was also divided on this basic issue. In the earlier stages Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Shri Rajagopalachari and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan sided with me. Dr Rajendra Prasad, Acharya Kripalani and Shri Shankar Rao Deo were however wholeheartedly with Gandhiji. They agreed with him that once it was accepted that free India could participate in war, the very basis of India's non-violent struggle for freedom would disappear. Maulana Abul kalam Asad on the other hand, felt that there was a distinction between an internal struggle for freedom and an external struggle against aggression. The struggle for freedom was one thing. To fight after the country became free was different. He held that the two issues should not be confused. Matters came to a head during the meeting of the AICC at Poona in July 1940. This was the first meeting of the Working Committee after the Ramgarh Session of the Congress. As President he placed before the Committee the issue as Maulana Abul kalam Asad saw it. The Committee endorsed my views. Two resolutions were accordingly passed. The first reiterated the conviction of the Congress that non-violence was the correct policy in attaining India's freedom and must be maintained. The second declared that in the war between Nazism and Democracy, India's rightful place was in the democratic camp. She could not, however, participate in the war effort of the democracies till she was herself free. The resolutions as finally accepted were based on my draft.

When the resolution reiterating non-violence as the basis of India's struggle for freedom was passed, Gandhiji was very pleased. In view of my attitude towards the war, it appears that Gandhiji had feared that the AICC might give up non-violence as the policy of the Congress. In a telegram of congratulations he sent to me, he said that he was particularly pleased that Maulana Abul kalam Asad had pleaded the cause of non-violence in the internal struggle. He had felt that in the present temper of the country, the AICC would readily accept my proposal that India should participate in the war if her freedom was recognised. In view of this, he had doubts if Maulana Abul kalam Asad could persuade the AICC to pass the resolution on non-violence in respect of our internal struggle.

The members of the Working Committee, however, began to waver in their attitude towards the war. None of them could forget that Gandhiji was opposed, on principle, to any participation in war. Nor could they forget that the Indian struggle for freedom had attained its present dimensions under his leadership. They were now for the first time differing from him on a fundamental issue and leaving him alone. His firm belief in non-violence as a creed began to influence their judgment. Within a month of the Poona meeting, Sardar Patel changed his views and accepted Gandhiji's position. The other members also started to waver. In July 1940, Dr Rajendra Prasad and several other members of the Working Committee wrote to me that they firmly believed in Gandhiji's views regarding the

war and desired that the Congress should adhere to them. They went on to say that since Maulana Abul kalam Asad held different views and the AICC at Poona had supported me, the signatories doubted if they could continue to remain members of the Working Committee. They had been nominated to the Working Committee to assist the leader, but since they differed on a basic question, they had no option but to offer their resignation. They had considered the matter deeply and in order not to embarrass me, they were willing to continue as members of the Working Committee so long as their differences did not have any immediate practical application. If, however, the British Government accepted his terms and participation in war became a live issue, they felt that they would have no option but to resign. They added that if Maulana Abul kalam Asad agreed to this, they would continue to serve as a members of the Working Committee. Otherwise this letter should itself be treated as a letter of resignation.

Maulana Abul kalam Asad was deeply hurt to receive this letter which was signed all members of the Working Committee except Jawaharlal and Rajaji. Even Abdul Gaffar Khan who had earlier been one of my staunchest supporters had now changed his views. Maulana Abul kalam Asad had never expected a letter of this kind from my colleagues. Maulana Abul kalam Asad immediately wrote in reply that Maulana Abul kalam Asad fully understood their point of view and accepted the position. The British Government's present attitude held hardly any hope for the recognition of Indian freedom. So long as the British attitude did not change, the question of participation in war was likely to remain an academic issue. Maulana Abul kalam Asad would therefore request them to continue as members of the Working Committee. .

In August 1940, the Viceroy invited me to discuss with him the participation of Congress in the Government on the basis of an extended Executive Council with larger powers. Even without consulting my colleagues, Maulana Abul kalam Asad declined the offer. It appeared to me that there was no common ground between the Congress demand for independence and the Viceroy's offer of an enlarged Executive Council. In view of this there was no point in meeting him. Maulana Abul kalam Asad found that many Congressmen did not agree with my decision. They argued that Maulana Abul kalam Asad should have accepted the invitation and met the Viceroy but Maulana Abul kalam Asad was and are still convinced that Maulana Abul kalam Asad had taken the correct decision.

Gandhiji's reaction to this episode was quite different from that of the majority of the Congressmen. He wrote a letter to me fully supporting my decision. In his view my refusal to meet the Viceroy was a symbol of God's grace. It was not the will of God that India should participate in this war. In his view this was the reason why Maulana Abul kalam Asad had refused to meet the Viceroy. This closed the matter, but if, on the other hand, Maulana Abul kalam Asad had met the Viceroy, Gandhiji feared that there might have been a settlement and India drawn into the war. Soon after this Gandhiji issued another appeal to the British. He again asked them to give up arms and oppose Hitler with spiritual force. Not content with addressing a letter to the British people, he also met Lord Linlithgow and pressed him to accept his point of view and communicate it to the British Government.

When Gandhi told Lord Linlithgow that the British people should give up arms and oppose Hitler with spiritual force, Lord Linlithgow was taken aback by what he regarded an extraordinary suggestion. It was normally his practice to ring the bell for an ADC to come and take Gandhiji to his car. On this occasion he was so surprised that he neither rang the bell nor said goodbye. The result was that Gandhiji walked away from a silent and bewildered Viceroy and had to find his way out to his car all by himself. Gandhiji reported this incident to me with his characteristic humour.

Internal debate within the Congress continued. So far as Gandhiji was concerned, Congress was not to participate in the war under any conditions. Maulana Abul kalam Asad agreed with him to the extent that India could not participate in war under the existing conditions. While we differed in our basic approach, we were agreed that India must withhold all support to the British in the present situation. The conflict between my policy and Gandhiji's creed thus remained a theoretical one. The attitude of the British united us in action even though our basic approach remained different.

The question arose as to what Congress should do in the present context. As a political organisation it could not just sit quiet while tremendous events were happening throughout the world. Gandhiji was at first opposed to any movement as it could be only on the issue of Indian freedom and would carry the implication that once freedom was gained, India would participate in the war. After the meetings at Delhi and Poona, when the British refused the Congress offer of cooperation, Gandhiji thought of a limited civil disobedience movement. He proposed that men and women should protest individually against dragging India into the war. They would dissociate themselves from the war effort publicly and court arrest. Maulana Abul kalam Asad held that there should be a more extensive and active anti-war movement but to this Gandhiji would not agree. Since Gandhiji was not prepared to go further Maulana Abul kalam Asad finally agreed that at least the individual Satyagraha Movement should start.

Vinoba Bhave was accordingly selected as the first individual Satyagrahi or civil resister to war. After Bhave, Pandit Nehru offered himself as the second volunteer and Gandhiji accepted him. A number of others followed and soon there was a nation-wide movement of individual Satyagraha. The upshot was that though Maulana Abul kalam Asad differed radically from Gandhiji in my attitude towards non-violence, the actual programme followed was one on which we both agreed.

There was also occasionally a comic side to such individual Satyagraha. There was a worker from the Punjab who without taking the permission of Gandhiji or the Working Committee offered Satyagraha. When arrested, he put up a defence, against the explicit instructions of Congress. The trying Magistrate convicted him and fined him one anna which he paid from his own pocket and set him free. This brought such ridicule on the movement in Punjab that Maulana Abul kalam Asad had to go there to set matters right. On my way back, Maulana Abul kalam Asad was arrested at Lahore. The arrest itself was not without a touch of humour. Maulana Abul kalam Asad was going to the refreshment car for an early cup of tea when the Superintendent of Police presented me with the warrant and his

respects. Maulana Abul kalam Asad replied gravely: 'I am honoured by the special distinction that you have conferred on me. You have arrested me even before Maulana Abul kalam Asad had a chance of offering individual Satyagraha. Maulana Abul kalam Asad was sentenced to imprisonment for two years and detained in the Naini Jail. After some time Dr Katju also joined me there. We did not, however, serve full term as two events of world shattering importance soon transformed the entire character of the war. The first of this was Germany's attack on Soviet Russia in June 1941. Within six months, Japan struck at the USA at Pearl Harbour.

Germany's attack on Soviet Russia and Japan's on the USA made the war truly global. Before the German attack on Soviet Russia, the war had been one between the Western European countries. The German attack extended the frontiers of the war to vast regions hitherto untouched. The USA had been giving substantial help to the United Kingdom, but she was still outside the war. The American Continent was untouched. Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brought the United States into the turmoil and the war became truly global.

The astonishing success of Japan in the earlier stages brought the war right to India's door. Within a few weeks, Japan had overrun Malaya and Singapore. Soon Burma, which before 1937 had been a part of India, was occupied. A situation was created when it seemed imminent that India herself would be attacked. The Japanese ships had already appeared in the Bay of Bengal and soon the Andamans and Nicobars fell to the Japanese navy. With Japan's entry, the United States had to face direct responsibility of the war. It had even before this period suggested to the British that they should come to terms with India. Now it started to apply greater pressure on the United Kingdom to settle the Indian problem and win India's willing cooperation. Though not known at the time, President Roosevelt, immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, requested the British Government that Indian leaders should be conciliated. The Government of India could not altogether ignore these requests and upto a point it decided to change its policy.

In December 1941, the Viceroy decided that Jawaharlal and Maulana Abul kalam Asad should be released. This decision was intended to test the Congress reaction to the changed war situation. The Government wanted to watch our reactions and then decide whether the others should be released. In any case, it was necessary to release me for so long as Maulana Abul kalam Asad was not free, no meeting of the Working Committee could be held. Maulana Abul kalam Asad was in a state of mental distress when the order of release reached me. In fact I felt a sense of humiliation when Maulana Abul kalam Asad was set free. On all previous occasions, release from jail had brought with it a sense of partial achievement. On this occasion Maulana Abul kalam Asad keenly felt that even though the war had been going on for over two years, we had not been able to take any effective steps for achieving Indian freedom. We seemed to be the victim of circumstances and not the masters of our destiny (Suryasa et al., 2022).

Immediately on my release it called a meeting of the Working Committee at Bardoli, Gandhiji was staying there and had expressed a wish that the meeting might be held. Maulana Abul kalam Asad went to meet Gandhiji and immediately

felt that we had moved further apart. Formerly we had differed on the question of principle alone, but now there was also a basic difference between his reading of the situation and mine, Gandhiji now seemed convinced that the British Government: was ready and willing to recognise India as free if India offered full cooperation in the war effort. He felt that though the Government was predominantly Conservative and Mr Churchill was Prime Minister, war had reached a stage where the British would have no option but to recognise the freedom of India as the price of cooperation. My own reading was completely different. Maulana Abul kalam Asad thought that the British Government was sincerely anxious for our cooperation but they were not yet ready to recognise India as free. Maulana Abul kalam Asad felt that the utmost the British Government would do would be to constitute a new Executive Council with expanded powers and give Congress adequate representation on it. We held long discussions over this issue but Maulana Abul kalam Asad was unable to convince Gandhiji.

Soon after release, Maulana Abul kalam Asad held a press conference at Calcutta. When Maulana Abul kalam Asad was asked whether Congress was willing to change its policy towards the war, Maulana Abul kalam Asad replied that it depended on the attitude of the British Government. If the Government changed its attitude, so would Congress. Maulana Abul kalam Asad made it clear that the attitude of Congress towards the war was not of the nature of an immutable dogma. Maulana Abul kalam Asad was further asked what Indians should do if Japan invaded India. Maulana Abul kalam Asad replied without a moment's hesitation that all _ Indians should take up the sword to defend the country. Maulana Abul kalam Asad added: 'we can do so only if the bonds which shackle our hands and feet are removed. How can we fight if our hands and feet are tied?'

The Times and the Daily News of London commented on this interview and said that this seemed to indicate a difference of opinion between Gandhiji and the Congress leadership. Gandhiji had adopted an unchangeable attitude towards the war which left no room or hope for negotiations. My statement on the other hand held out the hope of an agreement. When the Working Committee met, Gandhiji referred to the press comments in Britain. He admitted that these had influenced him to a certain extent and strengthened his belief that the British Government would be willing to change its attitude if Congress offered cooperation in the war. The debate on what the Congress attitude should be continued for two days but there was no agreed decision. Gandhiji stood firm in his view that non-violence was a creed and must not be given up in any circumstances. As a corollary to this, he could not in any circumstances approve India's entry into the war. Maulana Abul kalam Asad repeated my earlier view that Congress must place greater emphasis on the freedom of India than on non-violence as a creed (Suryasa et al., 2021).

It was a striking testimony to Gandhiji's wonderful capacity of finding a solution to the most difficult of problems that even in this impasse he had a formula which could meet the two opposite points of view. He had also a wonderful capacity of understanding and representing fairly a contrary point of view. When he saw my firm attitude on the question of India's participation in war, he did not press me

any longer to change it. On the contrary, he placed before the Working Committee a Resolution which faithfully reflected my point of view. Soon there was one other important change in the Indian political situation. Subhas Chandra Bose had, with the outbreak of the War, started a campaign for active opposition to the war effort. His activities led to his imprisonment but he was released when he undertook a fast. On 26 January 1941, it became known that he had left India. For over a year nothing was heard about him and people were not sure whether he was alive or dead. In March 1942, all doubts were set at rest when he made a speech which was broadcast by the Berlin Radio. It was now clear that he had reached Germany and was attempting to organise an anti-British front from there. In the meantime Japanese propaganda against the British occupation of India also gained in intensity. The result of this propaganda from Germany and Japan affected a large number of people in India. Many were attracted by Japanese promises and believed that Japan was working for Indian freedom and Asian solidarity. They held that since the Japanese attack weakened British power, helped our freedom struggle, and we should take full advantage of the situation. There was therefore in the country, section of opinion which grew more and more sympathetic to Japan. There was another point on which my reading of the situation differed from Gandhiji's. Gandhiji by now inclined more and more to the view that the Allies could not win the war. He feared that it might end in the triumph of Germany and Japan or at best there might be a stalemate. Gandhiji did not express the opinion about the outcome of the war in clear cut terms but in discussions with him Maulana Abul kalam Asad felt that he was becoming more and more doubtful about an Allied victory. Maulana Abul kalam Asad also saw that Subhas Bose's escape to Germany had made a great impression on Gandhiji. He had not formerly approved many of his actions, but now Maulana Abul kalam Asad found a change in his outlook. Many of his remarks convinced me that he admired the courage and resourcefulness Subhas Bose had displayed in making his escape from India. His admiration for Subhas Bose unconsciously coloured his view about the whole war situation. This admiration was also one of the factors which clouded the discussions during the Cripps Mission to India. Maulana Abul kalam Asad shall discuss the proposal brought by Cripps and the reasons why we rejected it in greater detail in the next chapter, but here Maulana Abul kalam Asad would like to mention a report which was circulated just before Cripps' arrival. There was a news flash that Subhas Bose had died in an air crash. This created a sensation in India and among others Gandhiji was deeply moved. He sent a message of condolence to Subhas Bose's mother in which he spoke in glowing terms about her son and his services to India. Later on it turned out that the report was false. Cripps however complained to me that he had not expected a man like Gandhiji to speak in such glowing terms about Subhas Bose. Gandhiji was a confirmed believer in nonviolence while Subhas Bose had openly sided with the Axis powers and was carrying on vigorous propaganda for the defeat of the Allies on the battlefield.

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