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Revisiting the Prospect of Congress-League Coalition in 1937

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Abstract

The League objected to Congress interference in Muslim affairs in Bengal and called upon the Congress to leave Muslims alone. These views were compared to what ultra-rightists like Bhai Parmanand had been saying on behalf of Hindu communalists. Radical League supporters demanded that non-Muslims should have nothing to do with Muslim affairs in any department of public activity. In politics, social, and economic matters, Muslims must function separately as a group and deal with other groups as one nation deals with another. Muslims in India should be treated as a nation. The Congress claimed that it represented the hunger and poverty of the masses, both Muslim and Hindu. The Congress believed that it would not be fulfilling its duty to the Muslims of India if it ever considered making pacts and coalitions with the Muslim League. Once the Congress entered into a pact with the Muslim League, it would lose the right to ask Muslims to join it. What worried Nehru more was the larger question of getting Muslims as a body to join the Congress. There were some fairly good and old Congressmen in the League, there were hopeless reactionaries, and there were moderate people who were at the borderline and could drift anywhere. Jinnah claimed that under no circumstances could the followers of Islam tolerate the position of dual domination by the British government and the Hindu majority.

Key Words: *Radical League supporters, Purna Swaraj, Unionist Party, Lucknow Pact, 1937 Elections*

In 1937, Jinnah strongly objected to Congress interference in Muslim affairs in Bengal and called upon the Congress to leave Muslims alone. Nehru compared Jinnah's views to what Bhai Parmanand had been saying on behalf of Hindu communalists. Jinnah's statement meant that in no department of public activity should non-Muslims have anything to do with Muslim affairs. In politics, social, and economic matters, Muslims must function separately as a group and deal with other groups as one nation deals with another. Similarly, in trade unions, peasant unions, business, chambers of commerce, and similar

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organizations and activities, Muslims in India were indeed a nation. Nehru said that he represented the Muslim comrades who still stood in the ranks of forces and who remained true to the Congress through the strain and stress of past years. The Congress represented the hunger and poverty of the masses, both Muslim and Hindu; the demand for bread, land, work, and relief from innumerable burdens that crushed them; the urge for freedom from intolerable oppression.¹

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in a statement urging Muslim voters of Bombay to support S.A. Barelvi in the 1937 elections to the Bombay Legislative Assembly, observed that even if Muslims wished to view the situation only from their point of view or for their own collective interest, the only right path to success for them was to support the Congress and not remain aloof from it. He suggested that Muslims could not achieve anything by keeping aloof from the majority. There were only two courses before them: either by supporting the Congress to win the sympathy and help of enlightened and tolerant Hindus, or by keeping aloof from it to strengthen the hands of fanatical Hindus. The elections had provided them with a valuable opportunity. By supporting Congress candidates, they could have demonstrated that they were not behind any other community in their efforts to win independence for the country and promote its welfare.²

Abdul Wali approached Nehru and expressed his apprehension regarding a coalition between the Congress and League parties in the Assembly, which was suggested to him by Khaliq. He wrote to Nehru that a scheme was being hatched with the help of G.B. Pant and Mohanlal to bring about such a deal. Abdul Wali said that the Congress would not be fulfilling its duty to the Muslims of India if it ever considered making pacts and coalitions with the Muslim League. The Congress belonged as much to the Muslims as to the Hindus. It could make coalitions or enter into pacts with socialist groups, but it could not do any such thing with any of the communal groups. That would have meant that the Congress disowned that particular community and treated it as an alliance. His idea was that once the Congress entered into a pact with the Muslim League, it would lose the right to ask Muslims to join it. In 1916, he was the paid assistant secretary of the Muslim League and had opposed the idea of the Lucknow Pact.³

In reply, Nehru showed his ignorance about the scheme to bring about a coalition between the Congress and the League Party in the assembly. Nehru agreed that he was also opposed to all pacts and coalitions with small groups at the top. The Working Committee was also opposed to it. Abul Kalam Azad also definitely opposed it. But what worried Nehru more was the larger question of getting Muslims as a body to join the Congress and to eliminate their vague suspicion of that body.⁴ In response to Abdul Wali's

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letter, Nehru further transmitted his apprehensions to Govind Ballabh Pant through a letter. He wrote that he was convinced that any kind of pact or coalition between the Congress and the Muslim League would be highly injurious.⁵

On the basis of conversations that Rajendra Prasad had with Jinnah in 1935, Rajendra Babu accepted that they were then able to evolve a formula. Because it was accepted not only in Rajendra Prasad's personal capacity but as the President of the Congress, Jinnah was offered to have it ratified by the Congress. Rajendra Babu was constantly in touch with prominent Congressmen while the conversations were ongoing and had received universal support for it from them. There were several members of the Congress Working Committee in Delhi at the time, and they were in full agreement with him. There was absolutely no difference among Congressmen, and he was successful in obtaining the support of the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha of Punjab as well. But Jinnah insisted on having the signatures of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and other leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha. This was difficult to secure, and the matter had to be dropped. It was not dropped because Congressmen were not agreeable, but because those leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha on whose signatures Jinnah insisted were not agreeable. It was not correct to say that a certain section of influential Congress leaders was deadly opposed to the formula, which therefore had to be dropped. Rajendra Babu had told Jinnah that the Congress and the League should accept the formula, and the Congress would fight those Hindus who were opposed to it, as it had fought them during the Assembly elections quite successfully in most of the provinces. But this was not considered sufficient by Jinnah, and as it was impossible to fulfill his demand that the Hindu Mahasabha should also join, the matter had to be dropped. The full record of the conversations from day to day was kept in the Congress office.⁶

In a letter written to Rajendra Prasad, Nehru expressed his views regarding any possibility of alliance with the Muslim League. He felt that during the general election in the U.P., there was not much conflict between the Congress and the Muslim League. It was the desire of both parties to avoid conflict as much as possible and to accommodate each other. In the early stages of the election campaign, a number of Muslims who were more or less Congressmen were doubtful whether they would stand on behalf of the Congress or the League. If they had been pressed to do so, they would probably have stood on the Congress ticket. But as there was no such pressure, they gradually drifted to the League side under the vague impression that it was much the same thing. The League election board in the U.P. was a curious affair. There were some fairly good and old Congressmen in it, there were hopeless reactionaries, and

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there were moderate people who were at the borderline and could drift anywhere. The election campaign was a tussle with the Agriculturist Party, which was wholly a Government Party of big zamindars. The League was also opposing them, and so inevitably, opposition to the League weakened. The Congress did not want to split the forces opposed to pure reaction. As the election campaign developed, the strength of the Congress became apparent. Many Muslims came to get Congress tickets. But as it was not desirable from the Congress point of view, they were denied tickets. Although Nehru regretted not having run more Congress Muslim candidates. There was no kind of arrangement between the U.P. Congress and the League, but a kind of convention developed. Nehru highly praised Maulana Husain Ahmad of the League, who was always very close to the Congress. During his tours, Nehru even supported the League candidate where there was no Congress Muslim candidate. But after the elections, there was a tussle inside the League, and the reactionary elements seemed to have gained the upper hand. Relations between the U.P. Congress and the U.P. League became more strained. During the convention at Delhi, this matter was discussed by the Congress with the Jamait leaders who had so far supported the League but who were also worried about the reactionary turn it was taking.⁷

After the convention, the U.P. League board became even more reactionary, and its president, the Raja of Salempur, joined the interim ministry. This created a crisis in the League, which resulted in the resignation of many members from its parliamentary board. Among those who resigned was Maulana Hussain Ahmad. Most of those who resigned were not M.L.As, but one MLA, Hafiz Ibrahim, also resigned and formally joined the Congress Party. There were at least four or five other M.L.As in the League group who were keen on joining the Congress Party but who for various reasons refrained at the time. During the months that followed, there was much controversy between the two groups of Muslims—those of the League and those who had resigned and their sympathizers, who were supporting the Congress. Bitterness grew, and the success of the Congress appeal to the Muslim masses irritated the Muslim Leaguers. So matters stood, and the distance between the League and the Congress continued to widen.

The first thing to be done was to concentrate on enrolling Muslim members in the Congress. Nehru believed that with a large membership, they would inevitably play an important part in Congress work and would help in shaping Congress policy. Complaints reached the Congress office that notices of meetings, etc., were not always issued in Urdu, and so many people remained ignorant of the activities.

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Therefore, the district and local committees were directed to issue notices in Urdu in all areas where there was an Urdu-reading population.⁸

Hasrat Mohani, in his article, stated that after the extraordinary success of the Congress in the last elections of the Provincial Assemblies, the idea of Hindu leaders had once again inclined toward the question that if Muslims too could be brought in line with the Congress like the Hindus, then nothing would remain to complete the predominance of the Indian masses against the government. Nehru had begun practical work in this connection, and a special department under Dr. Ashraf was started for this purpose. He warned regarding this movement that the mentality and method with which this movement was started would create further misunderstandings in Muslim minds. He criticized Nehru for his statement that "there is no objective of any All-Parties conference before us," which meant that he regarded the decision of the Congress as the final and binding decision for all peoples and thus wanted to coerce Muslims to accept Congress decisions. They would be proved right if, in answer to this move, Muslims came and said that they, under certain conditions, were quite ready to take their part in the struggle for India's freedom, but under no circumstances could the followers of Islam tolerate the position of dual domination by the British government and the Hindu majority. The Congress, instead of the vague and ambiguous term "Purna Swaraj" or "complete independence," should have adopted the goal of a free federal republic of "United States of India" as its creed. The federal language of this Republic of United States of India should have been termed Hindustani, and both Urdu and Nagari scripts should be equally recognized in all courts, offices, and schools and should be made compulsory for all. The minorities should be given the guarantee accorded to them under the Lucknow Pact of 1916.⁹

In response to Zetland's interest in the settlement of communal disputes in Bengal, correspondence between Abdul Halim Ghuznavi and the Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan (acting on behalf of the Bengal Anti-Communal Award Committee) proved inconsequential. The agreement, though, was the result of an effort spread over nearly a year. The correspondence was released for publication so that the proposal might be popularized during the election campaign and later might form the basis of a complete Hindu-Muslim settlement in Bengal.¹⁰

After Zetland received from Halim Ghuznavi an account of his negotiations with the Hindus, carried on with the intention of lessening the tension over the Communal Award, he noticed that the chief item in the agreement they had reached was the appointment of an equal number of Muslims and Hindus as

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Ministers. But since the appointment of Ministers was a prerogative of the Governor, he might object to having his hands tied by an agreement to which he was not a party.¹¹

Fazlul Haq believed that the Muslim Group would not consent to more than four Hindu Ministers in any proposed communal proportion for the Bengal Ministry. He assured the Bengal Governor that they would be able to get Hindu support for this 6:4 ratio. Therefore, Haq was of the opinion that if the Hindus agreed to the 6:4 ratio, there was no need for any increase in the size of the Cabinet to placate a section of the people who wanted all the advantages for themselves without coming forward to share the difficulties of the task before them. He also supported the idea that all ten Ministers should receive a salary of Rs. 2,500 per month, and no discrimination of any kind should be applied to put the brand of inferiority on a section of the Cabinet. There existed a distinction between Front Rank Ministers and Junior Rank Ministers in England.¹²

For various reasons, the problem of increasing the Muslim element in the Congress received considerable attention. Nehru felt that Muslim masses were inevitably thinking more and more in terms of common economic problems and common burdens together with others. The Congress was a political organization dealing also inevitably with economic problems. The objective of the Congress was political independence, irrespective of religion. And ultimately, it was this order that would remove the crushing poverty and unemployment of Indians. Some people had suggested that semi-communal nationalist parties should be formed, like a Muslim Congress party. Neither Nehru nor Gandhi believed this would encourage communalism and injure the larger cause. The Nationalist Muslim Party was formed in 1929 and had failed. Such halfway groupings confused the masses.¹³

Sir Syed Wazir Hasan advanced a powerful plea for Muslims joining the Congress and on June 20, 1937, declared his own resolve to resign from the Muslim League. Another reason was that for the purpose of carrying on a successful political and constitutional agitation, it was always advantageous that there should be one united front and one platform presented by a powerful, well-organized, and disciplined body such as the Indian National Congress. Syed Hasan held that the Congress was a union of all anti-imperialist classes and forces in the country. Every class participating in the anti-imperialist struggle might have its independent class organizations for its own specific class purposes, but all of them united in the Congress for the attainment of the common goal of national independence.¹⁴

The Congress Party obtained an absolute majority in the Legislative Assemblies in five provinces, namely Bihar, the Central Provinces, Madras, Orissa, and the United Provinces, while in a sixth province,

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Bombay, they won 87 out of 175 seats. In the provinces where there was a large Muslim vote, they were not so successful, though in both Bengal and Assam they formed the largest single group, while in the North-West Frontier Province they were strongly represented. The province in which they met with the least success was Punjab, and it was of crucial interest for the British to note that the large non-Congress majority in this province was not by any means composed entirely of Muslims. The Unionist Party in Punjab, which won 88 seats, comprised Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Indian Christians. A number of other Hindu and Sikh seats were won by members of moderate parties who could be expected on a number of matters to cooperate with the Unionist Party. In the elections for the six Legislative Councils, the Congress did not meet with the same success as in the Assemblies.¹⁵

Conclusion

The Congress represented the hunger and poverty of the masses, both Muslim and Hindu; the demand for bread, land, work, and relief from innumerable burdens that crushed them; the urge for freedom from intolerable oppression. It was observed that even if Muslims wished to view the situation only from their point of view or for their own collective interest, the only right path to success for them was to support the Congress and not remain aloof from it. Complaints reached the Congress office that notices of meetings were not always issued in Urdu, and so many people remained ignorant of the activities. Therefore, the district and local committees were directed to issue notices in Urdu in all areas where there was an Urdu-reading population. The Congress, instead of the vague and ambiguous term "Purna Swaraj" or "complete independence," should have adopted the goal of a free federal republic of "United States of India" as its creed. Such were the radical arguments on both sides that no coalition could happen in the cases of West Punjab or East Bengal.

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