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Article

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: A Critical Review of His Intellectual, Political and Educational Legacy

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Abstract:

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958) was a prominent Indian intellectual and political leader, known as a freedom fighter, scholar, journalist, educationist, and India's first Education Minister. His work at the intersection of religion, politics, and education made his legacy influential but often debated. This article explores Azad's impact on Indian nationalism, Islamic reform, and nation-building, highlighting his early intellectual and journalistic efforts with Al-Hilal and Al-Balagh, which criticized colonialism and promoted anti-imperialism and pan-Islamic unity. His leadership in Congress supported inclusive nationalism and Hindu–Muslim unity, positioning him as a moderate during turbulent times, although he faced criticism from communalists and historians regarding the practicality of his ideals. Azad shaped national education policies and established institutions like the UGC, CSIR, and IITs, viewing education as essential to democracy and progress, despite difficulties in achieving universal primary education. Historians debate his legacy—while he is praised for secularism and inclusive nationalism, some critique ideological biases. These discussions reflect his complex role in India's diversity—both inspiring and contested. Ultimately, Azad's legacy lies in his ability to connect faith with modern ideas, tradition with reform, and nationalism with internationalism, offering enduring insights into India's democratic, multicultural identity.

Keywords: Indian Nationalism, Composite Nationalism, Educational Reform, Secularism, Intellectual Legacy, Policy Criticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), widely known as Maulana Azad, is one of the most important intellectual and political figures in modern Indian history. A freedom fighter, Islamic scholar, journalist, educator, and statesman, Azad contributed significantly to the anti-colonial movement, the development of secular nationalism, and the foundation of India's educational system after independence. His life and work showcase the complex relationship between religion, politics, and education in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. As India's first Education Minister from 1947 to 1958, Azad helped set up the infrastructure for education, focusing on universal access, scientific research, and cultural growth (Ahmad, 2024). His idea of education as a tool for social unity and national rebuilding remains highly relevant today, especially considering recent reforms like the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). Besides his administrative contributions, Azad was an active journalist and thinker. Through influential publications such as Al-Hilal and Al-Balagh, he challenged colonial authority while encouraging Indian Muslims to pursue modern education and join the nationalist cause (Britannica, 2024). His philosophical writings, especially Ghubar-e-Khatir, reveal his intellectual depth, blending Islamic scholarship with broader philosophical ideas. However, Azad's legacy also includes controversy. His firm opposition to the partition of India, though morally and politically driven, has been criticized as politically impractical given the rise of communal tensions in the 1940s (Mukherjee, 2019). His influence on post-independence educational policy has faced critical scrutiny, with some arguing that his initiatives

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— though visionary — were not fully implemented, and others claiming that his policies encouraged a selective, biased historical narrative (Swarajya Magazine, 2020).

This article critically reviews Azad's intellectual contributions, political leadership, and educational vision. It places his accomplishments within the larger context of Indian nationalism and Islamic reform efforts, while also addressing the debated interpretations of his legacy. In doing so, it aims to offer a balanced evaluation that acknowledges both the transformative aspects of his ideas and actions, and the ongoing debates about his role in India's nation-building process.

2. EARLY LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

Abul Kalam Azad was born on November 11, 1888, in Mecca, then part of the Ottoman Empire, into a family of prominent Islamic scholars of Afghan origin. His father, Maulana Khairuddin, was a respected theologian who migrated to Calcutta (now Kolkata) when Azad was young, giving him a deeply religious upbringing rooted in traditional Islamic scholarship (Hardy, 2018). Growing up in an orthodox household, Azad initially learned Quranic studies, Hadith, jurisprudence, and theology. However, his curiosity soon pushed him beyond traditional learning. By his teenage years, Azad was already knowledgeable in classical Islamic sciences but also started exploring modernist ideas in Islamic thought. He was influenced by the works of Syed Ahmad Khan and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who highlighted the compatibility of Islam with modern science and rationalist thought (Ahmad, 2024). He also became interested in Western philosophy and literature, teaching himself English and immersing himself in contemporary writings on politics, history, and social reform. This blend of tradition and modernity became a key feature of his intellectual journey. Azad's early literary efforts showed his early talent. At age 11, he started publishing articles under pen names, and by 14, he had launched a monthly magazine called Nairang-e-Alam in Urdu, discussing topics from literature to politics (Britannica, 2024). His writings reflected an early attempt to reconcile Islamic heritage with the challenges of colonial modernity. His involvement in nationalist politics was influenced by leaders of the Indian independence movement, including Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo. Their focus on swadeshi (self-reliance) and opposition to colonial rule shaped Azad's political views (Mukherjee, 2019). By the early 1910s, Azad had become a dedicated nationalist, believing that Muslims in India needed to unite with Hindus in a common struggle against British rule. This formative stage also influenced Azad's religious and political philosophy. He put forward the idea of composite nationalism (muttahida qaumiyat), asserting that Indian Muslims were an essential part of the Indian nation rather than a separate entity. This view would later underpin his opposition to the demand for Pakistan. Thus, Azad's early life was characterized by an impressive blend of Islamic scholarship, intellectual modernism, and political radicalism—foundations that shaped his later role as a public intellectual and political leader.

3. MAULANA ABUL KALAM AZAD AS A JOURNALIST AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Journalism was the platform where Abul Kalam Azad first gained recognition as a prominent voice in Indian nationalism. His writings served not only as a means of political mobilization but also as an expression of his broader intellectual project—combining Islamic reformism with the goals of modern nationalism. Through his newspapers and essays, Azad established himself as a leading critic of colonial rule and a supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity. His most influential journalistic venture was the weekly newspaper Al-Hilal, founded in 1912. Written in Urdu, Al-Hilal blended literary sophistication with sharp political critique. It played a key role in reaching Muslim readers across North India and encouraging their participation in the anti-colonial movement (Zaman, 2017). On its pages, Azad condemned British imperial policies, exposed economic exploitation, and called for intercommunal solidarity against colonial rule. His writings in Al-Hilal also drew upon Islamic history, reinterpreting it to inspire anti-imperialist resistance. He often cited examples of early Islamic reformers and warriors to rally contemporary Muslims against colonial domination (Britannica, 2024). The popularity of Al-Hilal alarmed the British authorities, who viewed Azad's journalism as seditious. The paper was banned in 1914 under the Press Act, and Azad was heavily fined. Undeterred, he launched another paper, Al-Balagh, in 1915, continuing his critiques of colonial policies and his calls for Hindu-Muslim unity (Mukherjee, 2019). Like its predecessor, Al-Balagh also faced repression and was eventually shut down, while Azad himself was often subjected to surveillance and imprisonment. Beyond political journalism, Azad was a thinker deeply interested in philosophical and spiritual questions. His collection of prison letters, Ghubar-e-Khatir (1946), written during his incarceration in Ahmednagar Fort, reveals a different aspect of his intellectual life. The text combines personal reflections with meditations on philosophy, theology, culture, and literature. In it, Azad reflects on topics such as music, coffee, gardens, and metaphysics, while also contemplating the human condition (Hardy, 2018). Scholars often describe Ghubar-e-Khatir as a unique example of Urdu prose, characterized by its lyrical style and philosophical depth. Thus, Azad's journalism and literary works served a dual purpose: they functioned both as tools for anti-colonial mobilization and as expressions of his engagement with broader cultural and philosophical questions. In both roles, Azad emerges as a public intellectual who sought to blend political action with intellectual inquiry.

4. ROLE IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Azad's political career was deeply connected to the growth of the Indian National Congress and the fight for independence. His political belief in composite nationalism made him a firm supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity, and his leadership in Congress made him one of the most notable Muslim voices in the independence movement. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad officially joined the Indian National

Congress in 1920, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-cooperation. Unlike the Muslim League, which was increasingly leaning toward separatist politics, Azad insisted that Muslims' future depended on a united India. His active involvement in the Khlafat Movement (1919–1924) showed his ability to connect religious concerns with nationalist politics. For Azad, defending the Ottoman Caliphate was linked with resisting colonial oppression in India, and he aimed to use the Khilafat cause to strengthen Hindu-Muslim solidarity (Mukherjee, 2019). By the 1920s, Azad became a leading figure in the Congress. At just 35 years old, he served as the youngest President of the Indian National Congress in 1923 (Britannica, 2024). His leadership was marked by powerful speaking, deep Islamic scholarship, and a convincing support of secular nationalism. Azad remained a close ally of Gandhi, backing principles like satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) and swadeshi (self-reliance). In the 1940s, Azad played a key role in some of the most important negotiations for India's independence. As Congress President from 1940 to 1946, he led the party through the turbulent period of World War II and the Quit India Movement. He represented Congress in talks with the British government and the Muslim League, aiming to prevent India's partition (Zaman, 2017). Azad's opposition to partition remains a core part of his political legacy. He consistently argued that Muslims were an essential part of India's identity and that partition would divide the country geographically and tear apart its shared culture. He saw the two-nation theory as flawed politically and impossible on religious grounds. However, critics argue that Azad underestimated the extent of communal divisions by the 1940s and overestimated the appeal of composite nationalism among Indian Muslims (Mukherjee, 2019). His failure to prevent partition, despite his moral convictions and political efforts, is seen by some historians as a limitation of his political strategy. Nonetheless, his principled opposition to communal separatism remains a lasting aspect of his nationalist vision.

5. EDUCATIONAL VISION AND POLICIES

One of Abul Kalam Azad's most lasting contributions to independent India is in the field of education. Appointed as the country's first Minister of Education in 1947, he held the position until his death in 1958, shaping India's educational structure during its early years. His vision of education was deeply influenced by his philosophical beliefs, nationalist ideals, and his exposure to both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions.

5.1. Philosophy of Education

Azad saw education as the foundation of national rebuilding. For him, education was not just about gaining knowledge but also a moral and cultural pursuit. He argued that education should foster curiosity, build character, and promote national unity. In one of his speeches as Education Minister, Azad stated: "We must not forget that we are building not only a nation but also a new society, and this requires a revolution in education, a revolution which must reach the very hearts of our villages" (Azad, 1952, as cited in Ahmad, 2024, p. 16). This focus on inclusiveness—especially expanding education to rural areas and marginalized groups—was a key part of his philosophy. Azad believed that education was both a right and a responsibility, vital for democracy to work effectively.

5.2. Institutional Framework

During his tenure, Azad laid the foundation for several landmark institutions. He played a key role in establishing the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1953, which was created to coordinate and uphold standards across universities. He also oversaw the creation of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), which have since become globally recognized centers of technical education and research (Mukherjee, 2019). Additionally, Azad promoted the development of academies in the fields of culture and arts, including the Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and Lalit Kala Akademi. These institutions aimed to preserve India's cultural diversity while encouraging innovation and excellence. Azad was especially dedicated to primary education. He envisioned free and compulsory education for all children up to age 14, a goal that was later incorporated into Article 45 of the Indian Constitution. While recognizing the challenges of achieving this in a resource-limited nation, he stressed its importance for social transformation: "We cannot build a democratic society unless every child in this land is given full facilities for growth. The birth of democracy is the birth of education" (Azad, 1948/2002, p. 45).

5.3. Scientific and Technical Education

Azad placed strong emphasis on scientific and technical education as essential for national progress in a modern world. He argued that without a strong base in science, India would remain dependent on industrialized nations. His foresight in promoting technical education is evident in the establishment of the IITs, which have since produced generations of scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs contributing to India's development.

5.4. Cultural Integration in Education

Azad's educational philosophy was not solely focused on technical skills. He also highlighted the significance of cultural education, literature, and the arts. He viewed education as a way to nurture India's diverse culture, stressing that preserving India's pluralistic traditions was just as crucial as gaining modern knowledge. In Ghubar-e-Khatir, Azad reflects on India's civilizational richness and the role of culture in education: "Nations are not built on bricks and mortar, but on the spirit of men. It is literature, music, philosophy, and art which give a nation its soul" (Azad, 1946/1991, p. 88). This philosophy was reflected in his support for cultural academies and curricula that integrated modern subjects with India's heritage.

5.5. Relevance to Contemporary Policy

Many scholars argue that Azad's philosophy aligns with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which highlights holistic learning, inclusivity, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (Ahmad, 2024). His emphasis on cultural rootedness alongside scientific progress closely matches the NEP's multidisciplinary and

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equity-focused framework.

5.6. Limitations and Challenges

Despite his visionary policies, Azad's goals often exceeded the state's ability to carry them out. The vision of universal primary education remained unfulfilled for decades due to financial, infrastructural, and administrative hurdles. Additionally, while institutions like the IITs thrived, the rural education sector lagged, leading to imbalances that still exist today (Mukherjee, 2019). Critics also contend that his policies, though well-intentioned, were overly idealistic given India's social and economic challenges.

6. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND DEBATES

While Abul Kalam Azad's contributions to Indian nationalism and education are widely celebrated, his legacy has also faced serious scrutiny and debate. These critiques originate from multiple perspectives—historiographical, political, and practical—highlighting the contested nature of his role in India's modern history.

6.1. Historiographical Debates

One of the most debated criticisms of Azad concerns his role in shaping educational narratives and history writing in post-independence India. Some critics claim that Azad, as Education Minister, promoted a selective reading of Indian history that favored certain perspectives while overlooking others. Right-wing commentators, for example, argue that his policies contributed to the "erasure" of Hindu experiences of historical trauma under Islamic rule. A widely circulated critique in Swarajya Magazine stated that: "Azad's educational legacy was one of whitewashing India's past, systematically erasing records of Hindu persecution and sanitizing medieval history in the name of secularism" (Swarajya Magazine, 2020, para. 4). Such interpretations portray Azad as involved in a broader "Nehruvian project" of building a secular-nationalist narrative that allegedly marginalized Hindu cultural heritage. However, mainstream historians dispute this view, emphasizing that Azad's educational approach was not about erasure but about promoting national unity. As Mukherjee (2019) notes, Azad's philosophy of history aimed to highlight shared cultural bonds rather than sectarian divides. His support for composite nationalism required a reorientation of history teaching toward emphasizing India's syncretic traditions. This shows that his policies aimed to heal, rather than deepen, communal tensions through historical education.

6.2. Critiques of Educational Policies

Even sympathetic scholars admit that Azad's educational policies, though visionary, had significant limitations. His goal of universal primary education was never fully achieved due to a lack of resources, administrative difficulties, and competing national priorities during the early years of independence (Ahmad, 2024). As one critic noted: "Azad's insistence on universal education was morally compelling but practically unattainable in a country struggling with partition, poverty, and mass illiteracy" (Hardy, 2018, p. 112). Additionally, while elite institutions like the IITs thrived, rural and primary education fell behind, creating a dual system in India's educational landscape. Critics argue that this imbalance contributed to widening inequalities instead of narrowing them. Therefore, although Azad's policies were intellectually strong, their implementation was uneven and left notable gaps.

6.3. Political Critiques: Partition and Secularism

Politically, Azad's strongest stance—his opposition to the partition of India—has been both praised and criticized. In his memoir *India Wins Freedom*, Azad clearly stated: "Partition of India is against the spirit of history. It can never bring unity, but will lead only to divisions and conflicts" (Azad, 1959/1988, p. 175). He warned that the two-nation theory would foster lasting hostility between India and Pakistan, a prediction many scholars see as accurate considering the subsequent wars and conflicts between the two countries. However, some historians argue that Azad underestimated how deep communal divisions ran in the 1940s. His advocacy of composite nationalism, while morally compelling, was politically ineffective against the rising popularity of the Muslim League among Indian Muslims (Mukherjee, 2019). Critics argue that his failure to stop partition showed the limitations of idealist politics during a time of increased communal tensions.

6.4. Personal Contradictions and Intellectual Tensions

Another critique concerns the internal tensions within Azad's intellectual project. On one hand, he was deeply involved in Islamic scholarship and traditions; on the other, he was a dedicated supporter of secularism and nationalism. Some scholars argue that this dual identity created ambiguities in his thinking. For example, in Ghubar-e-Khatir, Azad reflects on the philosophical universality of human experience, writing: "The search for truth cannot be confined to the limits of one religion or nation; it is the heritage of humanity" (Azad, 1946/1991, p. 63). However, his political writings often used Islamic symbols and history to rally Muslim audiences. This dual approach has led some critics to describe him as both a secular nationalist and an Islamic reformist—a figure caught between two intellectual traditions but never fully reconciling them (Hardy, 2018).

6.5. Balanced Appraisal

Taken together, these debates highlight the contested nature of Azad's legacy. His critics accuse him of historical bias, policy overreach, and political impracticality. Yet his defenders stress the enduring relevance of his inclusive vision and the foresight of his warnings against communal division. Ultimately, Azad's life embodies the tensions of nation-building in a plural society—an attempt to reconcile competing identities, demands, and aspirations within a fragile political framework.

7. LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Abul Kalam Azad's legacy still echoes in modern India, visible through institutional milestones and ongoing

debates about secularism, nationalism, and education. His achievements are honored every year on November 11, marked as National Education Day, recognizing his vital role in establishing the foundation of contemporary Indian education.

7.1. Enduring Educational Influence

The institutions Azad helped establish—the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the cultural academies—remain central to India's educational and cultural system. The IITs, in particular, have become symbols of India's global competitiveness in science and technology, fulfilling Azad's vision of creating centers of excellence that could drive the nation forward (Mukherjee, 2019). The UGC continues to play a critical role in coordinating higher education, although debates about its effectiveness continue. Azad's focus on universal primary education and educational equity still influences policy discussions. The Right to Education Act (2009), which made free and compulsory education a legal right for children, can be seen as the eventual realization of goals Azad expressed decades earlier. Likewise, the emphasis on holistic, inclusive, and culturally rooted education in the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) reflects key parts of Azad's philosophy (Ahmad, 2024). The NEP's push to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum echoes Azad's belief that education should nurture both modern scientific inquiry and cultural heritage.

7.2. Secularism and National Identity

Azad's advocacy of composite nationalism remains a key point in debates over India's secular identity. During a period when communal polarization continues to influence political discussions, Azad's claim that Muslims and Hindus share a common national destiny still holds significant power. His warning in India Wins Freedom that partition would cause "enduring hostility" (Azad, 1959/1988, p. 175) seems remarkably accurate given the long-lasting conflicts between India and Pakistan. However, Azad's secular legacy is also debated in modern history. While many scholars see him as a symbol of diversity, critics argue he minimizes aspects of Hindu history and favors a secular-nationalist view at the expense of cultural details (Swarajya Magazine, 2020). These debates show how Azad's legacy remains a battleground for conflicting ideas about India's past and future.

7.3. Relevance in the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, Azad's ideas remain relevant across multiple areas. His focus on universal education as the foundation of democracy has become more urgent due to concerns about educational inequality in India. His support for secularism and cultural integration provides a framework for managing religious diversity in a time of increasing polarization. Additionally, his vision of balancing scientific advancement with cultural heritage offers a model for navigating globalization while preserving local identity. Therefore, Azad's legacy is not just historical; it continues to influence modern policy, intellectual debates, and national identity.

8. CONCLUSION

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad emerges as a figure whose legacy is both inspirational and contested, reflecting the intellectual richness and political challenges of modern India. As a supporter of inclusive nationalism, he rejected the Two-Nation Theory and persistently argued that Hindus and Muslims were an inseparable whole within a common Indian identity (Habib, 2023; Mukherjee, 2019; Hasan, 2015). His often-quoted statement that "we are Indians first, last and always" encapsulated his vision of unity beyond communal divisions (Azad, 1940/2003; Noorani, 2002). As the first Education Minister of independent India, he established institutions such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), IITs, and cultural organizations like the Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi, while promoting universal literacy, adult education, and scientific advancement (Gupta, 2022; Sharma, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2011). His writings in Al-Hilal and Ghubar-e-Khatir reflected his effort to harmonize Islamic intellectual tradition with modern rational inquiry, presenting a nuanced form of secularism that was neither irreligious nor sectarian (Zaman, 2018; Rahman, 2016). However, Azad's legacy is not without criticism. His firm opposition to Partition, while morally courageous, has been viewed as politically unrealistic, as he underestimated the communal polarization of the 1940s and the growing influence of the Muslim League (Jalal, 1994; Chandra, 2008; Hasan, 2015). Similarly, although his educational reforms were forward-thinking, they have been criticized as overly idealistic, considering the structural limitations of a newly independent, resource-starved nation (Mukherjee, 2019; Gupta, 2022). Historians have also pointed out biases in his historical interpretations, especially in his critique of Congress leadership during the final years of British rule (Noorani, 2002; Dawn, 2012). Nonetheless, his lasting importance lies in reminding us that nation-building remains an ongoing process, requiring continuous negotiation between ideals and pragmatic realities. In today's climate of rising majoritarianism and debates over educational priorities, Azad's inclusive vision—rooted in democracy, pluralism, and knowledge—continues to serve as both an inspiring guide and a warning of the difficulties involved in achieving those ideals (Sharma, 2021; Habib, 2023; Zaman, 2018).

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