

Maulana Azad: A Life

NEW DELHI: ALEPH BOOK COMPANY, 2023.

IX+318 PAGES., RS 899.

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Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, a multifaceted figure, was celebrated as a thinker, orator, journalist, politician, leader, and Muslim intellectual, with a deep understanding of both Islamic and contemporary knowledge. S. Irfan Habib's *Maulana Azad: A Life* offers a comprehensive and fresh biographical account, exploring key moments that shaped Azad's life and remain relevant today (p. 2). S. Irfan Habib (b. 1931) is a prominent Indian historian of ancient and medieval India and the former Abul Kalam Azad Chair at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration. The book challenges prevailing historical narratives, aiming to dismantle stereotypes about the past (p. 10). Structured thematically, it includes five chapters, along with an introduction and an epilogue.

In the introduction, Habib recognizes the limitations of available sources on Azad's biography, noting uncertainties surrounding certain aspects of his life. However, he underscores the importance of *Gubar-i-Khatir* (The Dust of Memories), which offers valuable insights into Azad's perspectives on various subjects (p. 11). Habib's goal is to present Azad within the contemporary "context of Islam and nationalism" (p. 14), portraying him as both a significant religious scholar and a staunch

advocate of nationalism. The first chapter, "The Early Years," examines Azad's ancestry, family background, and formative influences. Although Azad expressed disdain for his ancestral environment (p. 19), he admired certain family members (pp. 20-22). Khairuddin, Azad's father and a prominent Sufi scholar, played a pivotal role in his upbringing, though Azad later rejected "traditional" practices (p. 42). Despite Khairuddin's efforts to shield him from "atheistic" ideas, Azad encountered the works of Syed Ahmad Khan, which sparked intellectual and religious unease (p. 43). Habib also highlights Azad's early involvement in journalism at the age of twelve, earning recognition from scholars such as Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) and Shibli Numani (1857-1914). Furthermore, the chapter explores the ideological influence of thinkers like Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Rida (1865-1935) on Azad's religious and political thought (p. 61).

In the second chapter, "Maulana Azad and Critical Thinking in Islam," Habib contends that Azad's engagement with Islam was characterized by rationalism and critical inquiry. His intellectual development was influenced by Delhi-based scholars such as Mawlawi Zakaullah (1832-1920) and Nazir Ahmad (1831-1912), as well as the broader scientific and philosophical currents of colonial India. Habib emphasizes Azad's advocacy for pan-Islamic solidarity and his efforts to reconcile Islam with science, inspired by Jamal al-Din Afghani (p. 80), as well as his alignment with Salafist thought through Muhammad Abduh (p. 85). Notably, Azad's defence of Sarmad, a 17th-century Armenian mystic and scholar of comparative religion, highlights his intellectual openness. Habib portrays Azad as a liberal thinker who championed composite culture and transcended a narrow belief in religious unity (pp. 87-89). Habib commends Azad for his significant *tafsīr*, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, asserting that, prior to Azad, no Muslim scholar had truly grasped the Qur'an's core message—a claim that remains contentious. Azad employed reason and critical thinking, integral to Islam, to challenge the constraints of *taqlīd*, which had long stifled Muslim intellectual progress, enabling a genuine interpretation of the Qur'an. Habib provides an in-depth analysis (pp. 91-118) of Azad's interpretation, particularly of Surah al-Fatihah, the

Qur'an's opening chapter. In this interpretation, Azad conducts a comparative study of five religions to illustrate his respect for and belief in "the truth of all creeds" (p. 101) or the "unity of all religions." Azad sought to dispel notions of exclusivity associated with any religion or community, as Habib argues, "Islam as a faith is not a monolith" (p. 114). Indeed, Habib presents Azad's perspective that religions possess two dimensions: the unchanging universal spirit shared across all prophetic messages and the external manifestations, which are shaped by secondary, contextual circumstances.

In the third chapter, "Azad, Islam, and Nationalism," Habib provides a nuanced exploration of Azad's intellectual and political milieu. Beginning with a brief history of nationalism, Habib situates Azad within the broader context of nineteenth-century Muslim leaders and intellectuals in West Asia, influenced by the rise of nationalistic tendencies against European imperialism. Azad's advocacy for inclusive nationalism, shaped by an acute awareness of the dangers of communal politics in the Indian subcontinent, is highlighted. Habib underscores Azad's dual identity as "a proud Muslim and an equally proud Indian" (p. 129), emphasizing his commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity as integral to his vision of a unified Indian nation. The chapter also delves into the complex interplay between Islam and nationalism, drawing parallels between Azad's ideas and early Islamic history. Habib notes Azad's reliance on the example of Prophet Muhammad's alliances with non-Muslim groups in Medina, reflecting a progressive and composite approach to nationalism. This perspective is contrasted with the exclusivist stance of the Muslim League, countered by scholars like Mawlana Hussain Ahmad Madani of the Deoband seminary, who debated Iqbal's interpretation of term's like *millat* and *qawm* (pp. 34-47). For Azad, nationalism was not merely political but rooted in humanism, as Habib observes, forming the foundation of his nationalist thought (p. 147). Habib further examines the contributions of Azad's contemporaries and lesser-known figures who supported the cause of composite nationalism. He emphasizes Azad's reliance on leaders such as Allah Baksh Sumroo (p. 168) and highlights the sacrifices of numerous Muslim figures whose efforts for an undivided India remain underappreciated in contemporary narratives.

In the fourth chapter, “*Ghubar-i Khatir*: Beyond Faith and Politics,” Habib turns to Azad’s literary contributions, particularly *Ghubar-i Khatir*, written during his imprisonment in Ahmadnagar Fort. Described as a masterpiece akin to *Tarjuman al-Qur’an*, this work addresses diverse themes ranging from philosophical inquiries to personal reflections. Habib reveals Azad’s love for solitude, nature, and simple pleasures—such as swimming, tea, and birds—as well as his belief in cheerfulness as a hallmark of success (pp. 179–182). A significant focus is Azad’s passion for music, explored in what Habib identifies as Azad’s longest letter on the subject. Azad argued that music, far from being prohibited, remained a cherished art in Islamic history, with the Prophet denouncing only its excessive indulgence (p. 208). The work also reflects Azad’s deep engagement with Urdu and Persian poetry, further illustrating his literary and cultural sensibilities. Habib characterizes *Ghubar-i Khatir* as a “literary masterpiece,” offering unparalleled insights into Azad’s multifaceted personality and intellectual depth, aspects not as prominently featured in his other works.

In the final chapter, “Building a New India: Education, Culture, Science, and the Pluralist Ethos,” Habib explores Azad’s significant contributions to shaping post-independence India’s education, science, and cultural policies. Azad faced the dual challenges of addressing the economic devastation left by colonial rule and reforming an inadequate education system. He emphasized unity, justice (*‘adl*), and the democratization of learning as essential pillars for national progress (p. 228). Although well-versed in Western philosophy and languages, Azad criticized Macaulay’s education model for its failure to cultivate national consciousness and equity. Instead, he advocated for inclusive education, particularly for women and adults, as a means to counter societal narrow-mindedness (p. 231). While committed to preserving Indian culture, Azad pragmatically acknowledged the utility of English in modern education (p. 228). Habib highlights Azad’s alignment with Tagore’s humanist ideals, evident in his efforts to integrate arts and literature into education through institutional reforms. However, Azad’s vision was often constrained by persistent budgetary limitations—a challenge that continues to affect India’s education system (p. 240). The chapter

concludes by underscoring Azad's enduring legacy of pluralism, where his scholarly and cultural expertise informed progressive policy-making. For Azad, education was not merely a tool for development but a necessity as fundamental as food and shelter (pp. 231, 236).

In the epilogue, Habib summarizes the key themes from earlier chapters, highlighting Azad's neglect of personal health and reaffirming his stature as a visionary scholar rather than merely a politician—one who advocated for an inclusive, composite India (p. 271). Habib's analysis occasionally appears uneven, particularly in addressing Azad's controversial stance on the "unity of religions," which was rooted in his unconventional exegesis of *Surah al-Fatihah*. While many traditional scholars have criticized this view, others argue that Azad's position has been misrepresented¹—though scholarly ambiguity persists (p. 97). A significant divergence emerges in evaluating Azad's exegetical objectives. Azad sought to purify Qur'anic interpretation by removing Roman and Iranian influences, advocating for a return to the pristine interpretations of early Muslim exegetes. Habib, however, challenges this premise, arguing that interpretive diversity is not "un-Islamic or against the spirit of Islam" (p. 97) but rather aligns with Islam's rich intellectual tradition. The work has some shortcomings. Some references are missing (pp. 61, 91, 98, 109–110), while others are incorrect (pp. 109–111, endnotes 107–112). Additionally, some typographical errors are present (pp. 142, 145, and 185). Despite these issues, the book offers an engaging narrative of Azad's life and his pivotal role in shaping a unified India.

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