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Constraints and Priorities of Urdu Journalism in Post-Colonial Bengal: A Study of the Urdu Daily, *Āzād Hind*

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Abstract. Urdu journalism in postcolonial India has been subjected to significant criticism with regard to its contribution towards the shaping of Muslim public consciousness. The genre is believed to be devoid of secular susceptibilities and has been accused of stirring up religious sentiments of the Muslim community. Although there had been regions where evidence suggests that the Urdu journalism upheld the secular values and remained steadfast in proliferation of the democratic ideals among the Muslim Community. After the independence of India, Urdu language and literature faced several challenges. Despite many difficulties, Urdu journalism thrived and many newspapers sprang up in the young nation although only a few made positive impressions. This paper attempts to highlight the role of one among these newspapers, the leading Urdu daily of East India, *Āzād Hind*. This paper played a pivotal role in augmenting the democratic ideals, imbibing them in its readers and strengthening secular values among Muslims in the postcolonial era.

Keywords. Urdu journalism, postcolonial, Muslim sensibilities, secular, democracy, jingoism.

With the partition of India, the language which hitherto immensely contributed towards the cause of Indian nationalism suffered the discrimination at the hands of those who nurtured it once. The Urdu played a significant and revolutionary role in the freedom movement of India. Whether in terms of its poetry or prose it has always played a leading character in galvanizing the masses against the colonial rule and has largely fostered communal harmony (Narang 2003, Siddiqui 2014, Naqvi 1988). In the post-independence period, Urdu and all genres of Urdu writing were sidelined by the government. The indifferent attitude of government towards the Urdu hampered its progress (Farouqi, *Redefining Urdu Politics*:173

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Ditmer: 17-21). Adding to that the idleness and inefficiency of those who claimed themselves as trustees of Urdu speaking community also played a great part (Russel:45). Although in some parts of nation few protagonists of Urdu launched mass based democratic movements that achieved considerable success but after 1980 these movements also withered (Sajjad:190).

The partition of India not only reduced the status of Urdu from being a symbol of the elite to one of low prestige, but also appropriated it as a language of Muslims only (Hashim:118). And anything associated with the Muslim community began to be looked upon with suspicion as the early postcolonial period witnessed unprecedented Islamophobia. The vast majority of Muslims as Sardar Patel advised Gandhi, should go Pakistan as they are not loyal to India (Tendulkar:124). Urdu journalism faced the similar challenges and it is indeed one of the key areas which requires serious introspection to understand the position and responses of Muslims visa-vis national storyline of post-colonial India. Thus, delving into the study of it, will not only enable to understand the conditions of the Muslims during the period but also their responses towards socio-political conditions as well as their sensibilities and priorities.

In the wake of socio-economic changes which Muslims experienced in post-colonial India the position of Urdu and its journalism was exposed to several challenges ranging from social prejudices which developed towards language out of its mixed legacy of contributing to the cause of united nationalism as well as separatist tendencies. The migration of the elite section among Muslims to Pakistan who were the real patrons of Urdu journalism and formed the core of its readership as well as the economic considerations had profound impact on the trajectory of Urdu journalism during the concerned period. The government in order to appease the Muslims though, made several promises but neither the promises nor any material help were provided for the growth of Urdu journalism. (Farouqi, *Āzād Hindustān Meḡ*:181).

In the post-colonial period, the dominant discourse regarding the Muslims often revolved around issues of security and identity. The socio-economic issues received less attention while of the Muslim question often remained centered around the debates on secularism and communalism (Islam, *Rethinking the Muslim*: 65-66). Urdu journalism or what indeed was Muslim journalism baring a few newspapers is believed to found itself in this web. And within this mesh, how far it succeeded in meeting the expected role in empowering Muslims has received severe criticism. It is accused of playing a negative role in shaping Muslim sensibilities in the post-colonial era because it did not imbibe the spirit of adjustment within the Muslim community towards the changing practicalities of a nation divided on religious lines (Farouqi, *The Emerging Dilemma*:91-103). In fact, it was argued that Urdu journalism indeed was a failure in terms of the above-mentioned expected roles. It was also accused of arousing Muslim sentiment through

provocative writings which rendered the community as fodder to the communal leadership from both, within and outside the community (Farouqi, *The Emerging Dilemma*: 91-103).

This paper is an attempt to study a leading Urdu daily, *Āzād Hind* in post-colonial Bengal and challenge the sweeping generalization regarding Urdu Journalism in terms of its priorities and contribution towards shaping Muslim public consciousness. It will highlight the paper's contribution and importance in shaping Muslim minds; its presentation of a practical approach highlighting issues of the Muslims; fostering introspection and furthering democratic and secular values within the community.

Bengal, especially the city of Calcutta, cradled the earliest journalistic endeavors in Urdu language with the publication of *Jām-e Jahān Numā* in 1822 (Khan:33 Chandan:34-35). Urdu journalism also went through a revolutionary phase coupled with national consciousness under the leadership of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, over here (Shahjanpuri: 9-12). Urdu journalism in Bengal can be broadly categorized in two phases in the postcolonial period. The first phase (1947-1980) saw a crisis in the wake of partition. This was followed by a phase of consolidation. In this period Urdu was subjected to social prejudice as it was seen as a language of Muslims and that of separatism. Moreover, both, Urdu journalists and Urdu speaking people who formed the core of its readership had migrated to Pakistan. Many also left for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh from Calcutta as Urdu speakers in Calcutta largely comprised people from these two states, and despite their residence here, they did not revere the connection with their birthplace and in times of crises many returned to their ancestral homes. This was followed a phase of consolidation and indeed a rebirth in a new environment. The period witnessed the emergence of newspapers like *Āzād Hind* (1948), *Āsr-e-Jadeed* (1950), *Angāra* (1950), *Imroz* (1951), *Ābshār* (1954), *Akkās* (1966), among others. However, *Āzād Hind* rose to such prominence that the three decades (till 1980) of Urdu journalism in post-colonial Bengal have been attributed as the decades of *Āzād Hind* (Rizwanullah: 87). After that the use of offset printing by *Akḥbār-e Mashriq* paved the way for its dominance.

The second phase of Urdu Journalism in Bengal brought new constraints and challenges for Urdu journalism in the period following the lingual breakdown of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. This period witnessed the dominance of *Akḥbār-e Mashriq* (1980) owing to its shift to offset printing and decline of *Āzād Hind*. The paper gradually overshadowed the other newspapers and emerged as the sole mouthpiece of Muslim issues. A general classification has been made in terms of the dominance of newspaper in which the first phase can be attributed to *Āzād Hind* while the second one to *Akḥbār-e Mashriq* (Rizwanullah: p. 9).

Āzād Hind

After independence, contrary to popular perception the publication of

Urdu newspapers increased but reputation and standards fell greatly. There were however, some newspapers which carved prominent places for themselves, and *Āzād Hind* was one among them (Qadri: 60-61). It began publication in July 1948 and was owned by Abdur Razzaq Malihabadi, an associate and one of the most trusted men of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. He was entrusted with the responsibilities of all Azad's journalistic endeavors as Azad remained occupied in national struggle against British (Bharati: 37-38). After independence on the request of Abul Kalam Azad, Abdur Razzaq Malihabadi shifted to Delhi and the responsibility of paper was entrusted upon his son Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi. Under his command the paper reached new heights, particularly the editorials of *Āzād Hind* became very popular and amassed a large as well as a discerning readership.

Āzād Hind's contribution lies in the consolidation of Urdu journalism in a time when Urdu was faced with the social prejudices and its readership became limited both numerically and economically. It enjoyed the services of nearly sixty people, including Ibrahim Hosh, Akhtar Malihabadi, Rayis Ahmed Jaffrey, Iqbal Ikram, Shah Khalil-ur-Rahaman, Aga Haider Maikash and Rizwanullah. The paper comprised six pages, of which, the first and second covered national and international news particularly that involving Muslims. The third page provided the space for the editorial. The fourth comprised miscellaneous features and different issues were covered on days different issues. On Monday the space was given to Sports, on Tuesday, to women, on Wednesday, to health, Thursday to children; on Friday *Islāmiyāt* (Islamic religious studies) was given the space, Saturday was reserved for science and technology and Sunday for literature (Misbahi: 379-380). Page five covered news of neighboring states Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa. Page six focused on Calcutta and its surroundings. A weekly magazine *Ujālā* was also published which focused on religion, literature, politics and cinema (Misbahi: 379-380). The editorial was written mostly by the editor, Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi and in his absence the responsibility lay with Raqim Lakhnavi and Muneer Niazi (Azam: 200). The paper also published news items from other newspapers of the country as well as those from Pakistan. Major newspapers from which the percepts were extracted included *Zamīndār*, *Nawā-e-Waqt* and *Āfāq* from Lahore, *Imroz* from Karachi, *Pāsbān* from Dhaka, *Inquilāb* from Mumbai, *Afkār* from Bhopal, *Sāthi* from Patna, *Riyāsāt* and *Al-Jami'at* from Delhi, to mention a few. The paper ceased to publish from 15 August 2010 owing to the political occupation of Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi¹ though it started publishing again under the ownership Sharda Group (Fehmi:14).

The paper faced many litmus tests for its bold and fearless journalism. Every discrimination made by the government was reported and Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi got arrested too (Malihabadi:43). *Āzād Hind* faced a difficult situation in the 1970's also when Bangladesh was created. This was a challenging time for Urdu newspapers across Bengal as they had to balance

¹ Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi was nominated to Rajya Sabha as an Independent Candidate backed by Congress, in 2008.

between multiple constraints. Its Urdu speaking readership in East-Pakistan was facing the atrocities of the *Mukti Bahinī*. A section of the newspaper highlighted the helplessness of Muslims in East- Pakistan. While the general opinion of Bengalis in India was also kept in consideration, particularly the policies and stand of the Indian government. The newspaper survived this period and in fact played a key role in highlighting the futility of nation being created in the name of religion (Rizwanullah:143-144).

Politically, *Āzād Hind* remained largely tilted towards the Indian National Congress because of the family of Malihabadis long association with organization. However, during 1970's a powerful rival, *Sangam* forced the *Āzād Hind* to change its political affinities. *Sangam* was an Urdu daily launched in October 1952 from Patna by Ghulam Sarwar. *Sangam* and its publisher Ghulam Sarwar, an ardent supporter of Left politics, started the Calcutta edition of newspaper in 1970. He also played an important role during the election and addressed many rallies in support of a left oriented government. The election wiped the Congress Party out of power and *Sangam* thus enjoyed the patronage of the new government which posed a threat to *Āzād Hind*. The changed circumstances compelled Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi to favor the left alliance. (*Iqrā*, November 09, 1983). This was also the compulsion of time, because, as evident from election results, the Muslim public had turned its back on the Congress. Moreover, one of the major sources of income for the newspaper was government advertisements and it was common to all newspapers across languages to support the government in power to sustain themselves. Ahmed Saeed Malihabadi succeeded in garnering the support of the government and *Sangam* also stopped its Calcutta edition after one and half year (Rizwanullah:133).

Āzād Hind and its Proliferation of Democratic and Secular Values

The newspaper emerged as a mouth piece of Muslim issues and played a pivotal role in shaping Muslim lives. It remained firm against the tirade of communalism and always tried to imbibe the spirit of communal harmony. It always stood with the idea of secularism and the belief that the minority and majority of this nation are reciprocally linked to such an extent that without their mutual cooperation, progress of both would be hampered (Malihabadi:155). It played an instrumental role in navigating complex issues of communal and political identities. It upheld secular values and was instrumental in proliferation of democratic ideals within the community. It stood against every kind of religious discrimination in a democratic nation. This study attempts to highlight the democratic and secular stand to which the paper remained steadfast, by studying the selected editorials published in paper.

The first editorial in purview is related to issue of refugees which was one of the major concerns in the wake of partition. Communal animosity which had taken a heavy toll on the lives of people was still rampant. In its editorial published on April 11, 1957 titled, "*Pākistānī Hindu Aur Hindustānī*

Musalmān” (Pakistani Hindus and Indian Muslims), the paper attempted to highlight the discrimination on the basis of religion in terms of the refugee settlements. During the course of partition majority of people in India and Pakistan who suffered or migrated during the partition were unaware of the complexities they would be faced with and were concerned only with the safeguarding of their lives. But with the dust of partition and havoc it created settling in, the people started to move to their original places without knowing how partition has altered the fabric of nation. The treatment meted out to refugees was decided on the basis of religion. While the Hindus who were originally inhabitants of Pakistan were welcomed in India the Muslims who belonged to India were rebuffed. The paper criticizes this approach in the process of refugee settlement and demanded the endorsement of democratic and secular ideals while dealing with the issue of refugees and communalism associated with it.

In terms of political participation of the Muslims in independent India, the paper favored a farsighted approach. Though Indian Muslims in independent India never had a dominant and singular political articulation, yet they have largely favored secular political groups and distanced themselves from the communal forces of both majoritarian and minority variety. However, Muslim voting was interpreted in national terms rather than a localized trend. Against the backdrop of the onus the partition attached to the Muslims they were often demanded to prove their nationalism and loyalties and their political participation was largely recognized as homogenous (Ahmed:172). It was this perception and the compromises revolving around it at the behest of claimed secular political parties, which became one of the main reasons which crippled the secular forces combating communalism ideologically (Mukherjee, How Secular:2023). The logic of electoral politics led even secular parties to appeal to communal consciousness rather than attempt the relatively tough task of changing that consciousness (Mukherjee, *Political Economy*:393-399).

In the first general election of independent India in 1951-52, the majority of Muslims voted in favor of Congress candidates which indeed helped them in winning over the socialist communists and Jan-Sangh. However, in 1957 the Muslim voters voted differently and diversely reciprocating to their regional issues. While in some constituencies they voted for Congress candidates, in some, they voted in favor of left parties. The Congress could not digest the change in electoral politics and heterogeneous pattern in voting of Muslims based on their indigenous preferences. The changing trend of Muslim voting from national to local and different to being a single bloc of voters seemed reprehensive to Congress. In many circles Congress was seen accusing Muslims for being “*Pakistān Nawāz*”. (One who cherishes the idea of Pakistan). The paper criticized the Leaders like B.C Roy and J.C Gupta who accused the Muslims of being communal by nature in an editorial dated April 06, 1957. Moreover, *Āzād Hind* appreciated the diverse voting of Muslims particularly in Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, and this was celebrated in an

editorial titled, “*Khushgawār Tabdīlī*” (A Healthy Change) published on April 15 1957. The paper embraced the change in voting patterns of Muslims from a democratic point of view as this change was considered as a robust change indicating that Muslims have relinquished themselves from the effects of the past. It was argued to be a healthy change for the democratic buildup of a newly formed nation. This was probably welcomed as it was a step towards the linking of community with the nation rather than stigmatizing them as a single bloc. This attests to the spirit and nature of Urdu journalism which represented non-communal character and in fact promoted an approach which seems very instrumental in shaping the Muslim consciousness towards a progressive track.

In another editorial “*Hukūmat aur Jamhurīyat*” (Government and Democracy) published on May 06, 1957, serious apprehensions were raised against initiating a government inquiry to ascertain reasons behind Muslim’s voting for the left alliance. The editorial found it against the spirit of democracy where government was using state machinery for its electoral interests. It was perceived as a threat to democracy and a route to a police state. The Congress party was criticized for setting a wrong precedent for using the police for political benefits as this would prove harmful to the growth of the democracy which was still in its embryonic form. The paper was critical of the undemocratic approach of congress and was against the compromising of national agency for the electoral gains.

The paper was also against linking Indian Muslim with extra territorial loyalties to the global Muslim community. The Indian Muslim community is in itself heterogenous so the notion of a global Muslim Ummah does not arise. Even in South Asia there is not a singular framework by which one can identify the Muslims (Islam, Umma and The Dilemma: 40). The paper always tried to project the Muslims of India and their issues in ethnic paradigms. In an important editorial “*Ek Jhūtā Propaganda*” (A False Propaganda) published on April 23, 1957, the paper was critical of identifying the concerns of Indian Muslims with those of the Muslims across globe. This was in 1957 when the Congress government started a rumor that Muslims are not allowed to pray and fast in Russia, to woo the Muslims voters of the Communist Party.

The newspaper represented and promoted the secular values with an unprecedented intensity. It not only concerned itself with the policies of the government but was highly introspective in spirit while highlighting problems of the Muslims and addressing their issues. The paper was critical of the *Jamāʿat-e-Islāmi* and its approach towards the politics. In an editorial *Hindū Rāj Ki Dāwat*” (An Invitation to Hindu Nation), published on January 20 1959, the paper reassured its stand on political approach of Jamat Islam and termed it as *Fitnā* (Trial). Though the paper didn’t concern itself with the religious ideology of the group but regarding their political ideology, the paper was highly critical. It criticized both, the religious basis of nation as well as fusion of religious and political identity. It elaborated on how prioritizing the religion as the basis of state formation would encourage

communalists within the Hindu community and would pave way for new form of contestation. The political ideology of *Jamā'at-e-Islami* was condemned and perceived to harm Muslims even more than the harm the Muslim League brought to the Muslims of subcontinent. This approach was very significant while in the framework of secular fabric of nation. This critical approach of the paper represents the outmost determination of Urdu journalism towards the ideals of democracy and secularism on which the foundation of India was laid. It also affirmed the priorities of the Muslims of India who denied the foundation of a nation on religious basis and preferred the democracy and secularism as an ideal basis of a nation.

The paper also concern itself with the religious and social institution of Muslims too. From giving space to religious issues to be discussed rationally, to critical evaluation of the role and responsibilities of religious and social institution of Muslims, it played a pivotal role. In an editorial titled, “*Musalmānoṅ ke Dīnī aur Samājī Idārey*” (Religious and Social Institutions of Muslims), published on April 09, 1957, religious institutions were advised to generate their own sources of income as it was believed that India being a secular country was not bound to support any sort of religious establishments. This in fact was aimed to reassert the secular nature of state vis-a vis an attempt to guide the community towards self-reliance. The Muslim community in an independent India was advised to create their own resources in terms of supporting their religious priorities. India was believed to be a secular nation and its support towards any religious organization was believed to be contrary to its true spirit.

The paper also centered a lot of attention towards the education of Muslims as it was believed that the minority forms a very important component of the socio-cultural and economic patterns of a country and also complements the majority community. In an editorial published on May 18, 1957, the significance of education in terms of progress of nation was stressed. A progressive, educated, healthy and prosperous minority was believed to be capable of making positive contribution towards acceleration of economic development while a weak community was believed to drag down the socio-economic well-being of the nation. This affirms the newspaper’s approach to link the Muslim community with the nation and their role and responsibility towards the progress of nation which they belong. This linking of Muslims to the nation was attempted in a period when Muslim isolation was rampant and was used largely for self-interests by elites within the community and outside.

Another important fragment of the approach of *Āzād Hīnd* was its firm stand against jingoistic nationalism and appropriation of Muslim identity. In the post-colonial period, the issue of “Muslim isolation” frequently referred by Jawaharlal Nehru became a defining template of Muslim politics (Parthasarathy:254). This isolation was in regard to various political issues and was often used by Muslim elite to bargain for vested interests. For example, during 1957 the prominent leader of Bihar’s Momin Party, Abdul

Qayum Ansari established an organization named Indian Muslim Youth Kashmir Front and declared that within six months he will select around one lakh *razakārs* (volunteers) who will fight for the freedom of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. *Āzād Hind* was critical of this approach of Muslims in regard to Kashmir, and compared Abdul Qayum Ansari with Allama Anayatullah Mashriqi. In an editorial published on July 02 1957, the paper dubbed this kind of attitude as impractical and futile. Muslims were argued to be the part of a unified nation and any separatist efforts on communitarian basis were deemed futile and detrimental. The attempt was to delink the Muslims from becoming fodder to political elites and their vested political interests. This approach was found contrary to the efforts of paper towards linking the Muslim community with the larger, secular, national populace and vice-versa. For instance, in an editorial entitled, “*Kya ḥadd bhi hai is ghaflat ki*” (Is there a limit to negligence) published on May 18, 1957, while discussing the educational and social backwardness among Muslims it was argued that if Muslims fall behind the majority community not only, they but the entire nation will bear this impact. Because when a population of four and half crore is backward, it will become an underlying cause for weakening of the entire nation. *Āzād Hind* always tried to project the Kashmir issue as a national issue and expected Muslims to be vocal about the issue but stood against the identification of Muslims as a separate stakeholder. In another editorial “*Kashmir tanha musalmanoṅ ki zimmedārī nahīn*” (Kashmir is not solely the responsibility of Muslims) published on August 06, 1957, it was stressed that the issue of Kashmir must be understood through a national rather than a communitarian perspective. It was also emphasized that Muslims should not be considered as separate stakeholders in this issue as it was a pressing issue for the entire nation. It was further emphasized that Indian Muslims are certain that Kashmir is secure and will progress only under the auspices of India. The paper attempted to wean away the Muslim from every sort of jingoist endeavors in the name of patriotism which was believed to be detrimental towards their progress. The paper tried to link the Muslims with larger whole of nation and thereby standing against the bargaining of Muslim emotions by the political elite for their vested interests. This approach was rationally apt in the changing circumstances which was possibly aimed to prevent the Muslims a from becoming fodder to the communalist and political elites within the community. Moreover, such emotive endeavors would have possibly further stigmatized the Muslim community in an era where they were already encountered with the other severe challenges.

Conclusion

The Urdu journalism in Bengal appears to be altogether different when juxtaposed with the perceptions surrounding the Urdu journalism in post-colonial India. After the careful analysis of the approach of *Āzād Hind* which remained leading Urdu daily of East India for three decades in terms of

shaping Muslim public consciousness, this study suggests that generalization in terms of historical discourses surrounding the Muslims of India and the varied arenas of their associations should be countered within the framework of ethnicity. In post-colonial India a significant change can be witnessed in socio-economic and political conditions. Amidst these changes Urdu journalism in Bengal in general, and *Āzād Hind* in particular contributed immensely in pluralizing and strengthening of democracy. It stood against every sort of discrimination as well as appeasement on the religious lines. While it contributed through raising issues about discrimination and victimization of Muslims at the hands of the state and its machinery it also stood against the tirade of communalism and challenged communal agendas within the community and outside. It endeavored to link the Muslim community to the larger part of nation and vice versa. It also emphasized the pre-eminence of a significant minority in hastening the socio-economic prosperity of a nation. It strove to imbibe the sense of introspection within the Muslims to take positive steps towards adaptation and change in consonance with the secular frameworks of nation. Although the criticism which Urdu journalism faced with regard to shaping Muslim sensibilities stands true to a large extent, but in Bengal though *Āzād Hind* made considerable efforts in shaping Muslim public consciousness within democratic and secular alignments.

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