

MUSLIM IDENTITY AND UNIONIST PARTY IN PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

The Unionist Party was the ruling party in the Punjab since 1937 to end of the British rule. The Unionist Party was not communal in character; it represented the interests of landlords, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. But the Unionist Muslims were concerned about Muslim interests. They followed a policy of aligning with the communal Muslim League at the national level; and attacked the Congress. The Unionists, failed to check the growth of communal politics of which riots were the external manifestations. At times the Unionists encouraged communal politics, i by allowing communal propoganda as long as it did not result in riots.

KEYWORDS: *Unionist Party, Muslim League, Communal Politics, External Manifestations.*

Introduction

The Sikander-Jinnah Pact was concluded in Oct. 1937 at Lucknow session of the All-India Muslim League. By the Sikander-Jinnah Pact, the Unionist Party was further weakened and its ideological position completely shattered by an understanding with the All-India Muslim League.ⁱⁱ Under the Pact all the Muslim members of the Unionist Party who were not the members of Muslim League were advised to join the Muslim League if they so desired.ⁱⁱⁱ They would form a Punjab Muslim League Assembly Party with central and provincial Parliamentary Boards of All India Muslim League. According to the agreement, the Provincial Parliamentary Board would be reconstituted. However, it was not to affect continuation of the existing coalition ministry which would retain its name Unionist Party.^{iv} The effect of the Pact was that the Muslim League position in the Punjab and in all India politics was strengthened. The Governor of Punjab, Glancy, wrote to Viceroy Linlithgow, on July 20, 1943, "Muslim League to exercise increased pressure on the ministry and that Khizr is in some respects in a weaker position than his successor. But, for this, Sikander is very largely blame, as the surrender which he made, some times unnecessarily, to Jinnah. He has left his successor an unpleasant heritage, Sikander-Jinnah Pact, while acknowledging the supremacy of the League in all India affairs."^v

Sikander played a leading role in all-India Muslim League politics through the years 1937-40. During this period, Sikander, not Jinnah, was the powerful Muslim political leader^{vi} not only in the Punjab but also in other parts of India. The All-India Muslim League Working Committee's meeting was held on March 21, 1940. It appointed a committee, with the Quaid-i-Azam and Sikander Hayat Khan as its members, to draft a resolution.^{vii} Sir Sikander had sent his suggestions as regards Pakistan to Jinnah in

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advance of the session through Maqbool and he gave his version, "I have no hesitation in admitting that I was responsible for drafting the original resolution. But let me make it clear that the resolution which I drafted was radically amended by the Working Committee, and there is a wide divergence between the resolution which I drafted and the one that was finally passed."^{viii}

Sikander played an important role in organising the Muslim League session in 1940 at Lahore, and joined with Jinnah in initially drafting the resolution that articulated the Pakistan demand. Muslim Leaguers made a deliberate attempt to excite communal hatred and animosity in the Punjab. The Governor of Punjab, Craik, wrote to Linlithgow, on March 4, 1941, "Sikander seems quite convinced that with a general election now fairly imminent, he cannot much longer maintain his present equivocal ("neutral") attitude towards Pakistan without running a grave risk of the breaking up his party and the loss of his own political influence and position."^{ix} In another letter Glancy wrote to Linlithgow on Nov.28, 1942, "Sikander found it expedient to attend the Muslim League Meeting at Lyallpur and to make his obeisance to the Quid-i-Azam".^x Sikander's Muslim followers, as members of the Muslim League, became formally committed to the demand of Pakistan.^{xi} The Punjab Premier, Sir Sikander Hayat Khan, refused to take any action against them or to cut short their career of mischief. He deliberately avoided making any direct or specific reference to the Pakistan Scheme.^{xii} On the contrary Sikander sought to act as a "true" Muslim by playing the role of the defender and promoter of the faith. Sikander proposed a resolution in the assembly calling for a voluntary and temporary cess on all Muslims in Punjab of one paisa per rupee on the land revenue for the repair of mosques, and he projected himself as a "protector of the mosques" and as well as the Muslim community.^{xiii} Sikander also supported the case of the Shahidagang mosque, and became a spokesman for the Muslim community in the eyes of both urban Muslims and rural pirs. The Governor of Punjab, Craik, wrote to Linlithgow, on Oct 16, 1940, "It is very significant that after the League meeting at Delhi, Sikander made a series of public speeches in Gurgaon, Rohtak and Ludhiana Districts, advocating in the strongest possible terms full cooperation in Govt. War effort and castigating people who had not subscribed the War Purposes Fund."^{xiv}

Sir Fazl-i-Husain, the founder of the Unionist Party, was greatly concerned at the poor plight of his community in the Punjab. He endeavoured to improve their prospects in all possible ways. Cooperation with the government to achieve his objectives was one of his methods. He exhorted all Muslims not to join the civil disobedience movement of 1930s. It was in his opinion, a negative event. He stressed that the position of Muslims was precarious. The need was for something much more constructive, better organisation, greater effort and local schemes of development and uplift. Sir Nazim-Ud-Din wrote to Fazl-i-Husain from Bengal, "you are the only man who can save the Muslims from their ruination"^{xv}

Fazal-i-Husain organised Muslim public opinion inside the Executive Council and consolidated Muslim opinion in the Punjab and Bengal. He succeeded to get support of most of the Muslim members of the local legislatures and other prominent Muslim public men to issue joint statements. He wrote to Sikander, "I hope you will exert yourself to keep different cliques together. It would be great pity to let them drift. This is a very critical stage in the development of the community and a false step taken will relegate the Punjab to the position of a backward Province tied to the chariot wheels of Hindu India". He further told him that in Bengal Sir Nazim-Ud-Din helped to solidify Muslim opinion, and brought together the Muslims of various parties.^{xvi} Once he wrote to Muhammad Shafi, "there is no question of nationalism, but only of dominating over Muslims. No one is ready to sacrifice the Muslim community and its culture and its future to hasten the bringing of the end."^{xvii} Sir Fazl-i-Husain was the most important spokesman for the Muslim interests during 1920s and 1930s and in this period he demanded greater Muslim representation on Municipal committees, in educational institutions, and in government services.^{xviii} He gained in reputation in all India politics when he formed in 1929 of the All India Muslim Conference and his appointment in 1930 as the leading Muslim representative on the Viceroy's Executive Council.^{xix}

In the region of politics, the All-India Muslim League and All-India Muslim Conference were protecting and advancing Muslim interests. The Muslim League represented the English educated Muslim middle class and on the other hand the All-India Muslim Conference represented the conservative elements. But both swore by the separate interests in religion, social life and political interests of their community in the country.^{xx}

The Muslim Conference meeting was held at Lahore on 21 March, 1932, and supported the resolution that religious education would be given to Muslim boys in municipal, district boards schools,

and as well as public schools and colleges.^{xxi} The meeting also supported to bring about unity between the Muslim organisations in the country for political emancipation, economic betterment and solidarity of the community. The following resolutions were passed on June 5, 1932, by Working Committee of the all India Muslim Conference: "the committee is strongly of opinion that the Muslims of the Federal Upper House should be elected only by the Muslim members of their provincial Legislature. The Muslim must be given a share in proportion to their representation in all municipal and Legislatures." The Committee opposed the special representation to the labour and fancy franchise for the women.^{xxii}

As Minister of education, Fazli-Husain took a keen interest in promoting the cause of education amongst the Muslims. He provided generous grants and increased the establishment of new Muslim schools and colleges. The Punjab Hindu elite stoutly opposed him not only for his unfair and unjust distribution of patronage to his community,^{xxiii} but also for the reason that he had extended the principle of separate representation to the local bodies, educational institutions and public services. The Tribune wrote, "the tide of communalism among the educated and politically minded Mussalmans of the Punjab, thanks largely to Sir Fazli-Husain's policy, has been so high during the last four years, that it is no easy thing for any individual or group to go against the tide."^{xxiv} The Viceroy, Reading, wrote to Secretary of State, on August 17, 1923, "feeling intensified among educated classes by attempts of Muhammadan Ministers to obtain for Muslims fair share of posts on Municipal Committees and in Govt. services."^{xxv}

He had become the protector of the Muslim interests, particularly, Muslims of the Punjab. Fazli-Husain did not ignore the role of Islam in Punjab politics and by the mid 1930s he was the director of Muslim policy and a strong advocate of Muslim interests. He was widely known among the Hindus and Sikhs as a communal politician.^{xxvi} What was the chief cause of the amazing success of the Unionist Party. Apart from other factors, one principal reason was the support it drew from the Muslim religious leaders who were held in high esteem in the countryside.

Most of the Muslim population in the Punjab except south-east Punjab, were located in the countryside and they were highly influenced by the Sufi pirs and Sajjadanashins.^{xxvii} The Unionist Party was based on the power of rural magnets, who provided religious legitimacy to the Unionists. The support of these pirs, even if expressed only tacitly, guaranteed the Unionists as a religious following in rural Punjab. These religious leaders were creating religious identity and community consciousness among the Muslims, and when the Unionist Party declined in the Punjab, most of them supported Pakistan movement on the basis of Islamic identity and solidarity as a Islamic Nation.

Though, Sir Fazli-Husain accepted the theoretical importance of all India Muslim organisation but he was worried about Jinnah's leadership who had attacked not only provincial foundation of the Unionist Party, but also the structure of their local influence. When Fazli-Husain reorganised the Unionist Party in 1936, he thus sought to strengthen the party's links to the mediatory Islamic leadership of the rural localities. In election of 1937, mediatory Islamic leadership played a significant role in favour of Unionist Party.

The Unionist Party made efforts to use Islam during the 1946 election as a mass mobiliser like the Muslim League.^{xxviii} Malik Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana quoted quotations from the Quran in his discourses in addition to dwelling on the economic benefits brought by his party to the rural population. In a speech he used the verse of the Sura Fatiha to prove that the Unionist Party had greater Islamic justification as compared to the Muslim League.^{xxix} The Unionist Party flew at its election camps an Islamic flag identical to the League's. Shortly before his death, Sir Chhotu Ram had drawn up a plan for employing the Ulema to campaign against the demand for Pakistan.^{xxx} But it had little political effect for the Unionist Party in 1946, because political circumstance had changed and became in favour of Muslim League and the demand of Pakistan.

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