

# CHALLENGING THE MAINSTREAM: BADRUDDIN TYABJI'S OPPOSITION TO MUSLIM SEPARATISM IN BRITISH INDIA

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**Abstract:** Contrary to the widespread belief that the Muslim community in British India unanimously championed the idea of separatism in the Subcontinent, there were, after all, some key figures among them who opposed this tendency wholeheartedly. This paper seeks to set out the example of a prominent Muslim leader, Badruddin Tyabji (1844-1906), a lawyer and later a judge, who had a different conception as to the lot of his coreligionists in the Indian Subcontinent.

**Keywords:** Muslim separatism, Badruddin Tyabji, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Indian National Congress

When reading about the history of Muslim separatism in British India, which eventually led to the creation of a new state, Pakistan, by mid-twentieth century, one cannot help being struck by the fact that there were, after all, a few key Muslim figures who vehemently opposed such separatist tendency. In this paper, I will try to set out the example of a prominent Muslim leader, Badruddin Tyabji (1844-1906), a lawyer and later a judge, who had a different conception as to the lot of his coreligionists in the Indian Subcontinent.

Badruddin Tyabji was concerned about the predicament of his coreligionists in British India in the decades following the fateful happenings of 1857. He attributed this situation, in the main, to the lack of organization as well as the religious narrow-mindedness which prevailed among the members of his community. He believed that the only panacea was to reform the Muslim society in the Subcontinent. Therefore, alongside other Muslim intellectuals, he founded an association called Anjuman-i-Islam in Bombay in 1874 (or 1876) whose main objective was the socio-cultural regeneration of the Muslim community as well as its advancement both in education and

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social standing. As explained by Pratik Daga, who pointed out that Badruddin Tyabji pleaded with his coreligionists to “give up religious prejudices and practices such as the purdah system” and put great emphasis on the modernization of Muslim education. In the meantime, he also “wanted women to be educated so that they could gain their rightful place in society.” (Daga)

Nevertheless, the approach that Badruddin Tyabji adopted in his campaign to reform and advance the Muslim community differed to a large extent from the other contemporaneous Muslim reformist movements in British India. Whereas, by and large, most of the latter had a tendency to veer away from the Indian mainstream society, such as Shah Waliullah’s movement, Tyabji strove to make Indian Muslims an integral part of it.

To put it differently, Badruddin Tyabji did not want to advance the interests of his coreligionists at the expense of other fellow countrymen of other faiths, especially the Hindus. On the contrary, he always regarded Indian Muslims as indivisible from the Indian society as a whole. For the sake of illustration, it is interesting to mention the case of Urdu. This language, often regarded as a symbol of Muslim identity and a divisive element pertaining exclusively to the Muslims of India which was often used by Muslim nationalists to appeal to the sentiments of their coreligionists, was considered by Badruddin Tyabji as a “symbol of all-Indian unity” (Karlitzky, 191). In this respect, Maren Karlitzky states that Badruddin Tyabji saw Urdu as “a link language and a means of integration with nationwide élites, whether in a Muslim or an all-Indian context.” (Ibid.)

Badruddin Tyabji’s stance put him on a collision course with many members of his community. His claim of leadership among the Muslims of India was often challenged by other figures. Even within the association that he helped found, that is, Anjuman-i-Islam, he faced strong opposition. According to Anil Seal, “a determined body of opponents” had once tried to oust Badruddin Tyabji who already had an uncertain control in the association. (Seal, 330) This opposition mostly resulted from his efforts to keep this association away from politics despite the unrelenting insistence of its members. In fact, Badruddin Tyabji did not want Anjuman-i-Islam to get involved in any political activity given the fact that it was exclusively a Muslim organization. Instead, he preferred a broad-based organization, which would include Indians regardless of their creed, to be entrusted with this task. In this respect, Anil Seal reported on Tyabji as saying:

The Anjuman has as a rule abstained from discussing political questions because the majority of such questions affect not merely the Mahomedans but the whole population of India in general, and therefore it is better that they should be discussed by the general political bodies composed of all classes of Her Majesty's subjects, and not merely by a body of Mahomedans as the Anjuman is. (Ibid.)

In other words, Badruddin Tyabji did not want his co-religionists to claim any political rights as Muslims but rather as Indians, and therefore, this explains why he joined heart and soul the first major political party on an all-India basis, namely, the Indian National Congress. Indeed, Badruddin Tyabji became a prominent member of this widely-based political organization, and as a token of appreciation of his dedication and commitment to this organization, he was made president of its third session which met in Madras in 1887. (Sharma, 14) Commenting on his appointment to the Congress presidentship, Badruddin Tyabji stated:

I have always regarded it as the highest honour, higher than being on this bench ... let me tell the Council that in my court no contemptuous reference to that body (i.e. Congress) will be permitted. (Quoted in, Saxena, 65)

Therefore, Badruddin Tyabji became, *par excellence*, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's staunch political antagonist since the latter's advice to the members of his community was to give the Indian National Congress a wide berth. In fact, it was part of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's strategy to protect his community that he warned them against getting involved in politics, and accordingly, he directed all his efforts to keep them away from what he termed the 'Hindu' Congress.

Meanwhile, it should be pointed out that the Congress founders, overwhelmingly Hindus, tried all means to woo Muslim membership. For instance, as a way to attract their Muslim fellow countrymen to join the Congress, the founders went to the extent of offering return fares. (Wasti, 7) Be that as it may, Muslim membership in the Indian National Congress remained very limited and irregular; as can be seen in the following table where Muslim attendance between 1885 and 1910 was registered:

## Muslim Representation in the Congress: 1885-1910

Congress Session	Place	Total Delegates	Muslim Delegates
1885	Bombay	72	2
1886	Calcutta	440	33
1887	Madras	607	79
1888	Allahabad	1,248	219
1889	Bombay	1,889	248
1890	Calcutta	677	116
1891	Nagpur	list not available	list not available
1892	Allahabad	625	91
1893	Lahore	867	65
1894	Madras	1,163	23
1895	Poona	1,584	25
1896	Calcutta	784	54
1897	Amraoti	692	57
1898	Madras	614	10
1899	Lucknow	789	313
1900	Lahore	567	56
1901	Calcutta	896	74
1902	Ahmedabad	417	20
1903	Madras	538	9
1904	Bombay	1,010	35
1905	Benares	756	20
1906	Calcutta	1,663	45
1907	Surat	adjourned <i>sine die</i>	adjourned <i>sine die</i>
1908	Madras	626	10
1909	Lahore	234	5
1910	Allahabad	636	19

Source: S. R. Wasti, *Lord Minto and the Indian Nationalist Movement: 1905-1910*, *op. cit.*, p. 221

Hence, this survey of the number of Muslim delegates to the sessions of the Indian National Congress reflects the widespread attitude of indifference, as well as disinterest, among the Muslim community towards this newly formed political organization. However, in the eyes of many contemporaries in British India, this attitude meant that Sir

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's coreligionists had heeded his advice and had taken it in earnest.

Nonetheless, Syed Razi Wasti pointed out that in order to play down the poor, as well as irregular, Muslim attendance in the Congress' sessions, the Congress activists kept evoking the fact that the convenience of the place where the sessions were held was the decisive factor. (Ibid.)

In the meantime, while Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his followers were campaigning against the Indian National Congress, Badruddin Tyabji, being loyal to this political organization, was simultaneously conducting a counter-campaign to counter-act Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *'fatwa'* and incite his co-religionists to rally around the Congress. (Sharma, 14) As reflected in the following excerpt from a letter that he wrote to a group of Muslim intellectuals in which he endeavoured to persuade them to join the Congress:

As to the advantages the Mahomedans will gain by joining the Congress, they will gain the same advantages as the Hindus, ... and that it is the duty of all people who call India their motherland, to unite together for the purpose of promoting the common good of all, irrespective of the distinction of caste, colour or creed. (Quoted in, Habib)

Actually, according to Madhu Limaye, Badruddin Tyabji had previously tried to persuade Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to change his attitude towards the Indian National Congress; however, he received a swift and definite reply: 'no way!' (Limaye, 143)

In this respect, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan explained to this pro-Congress Muslim activist the fact that had the Indian National Congress been founded to deal with "social questions", he would himself "have been its president". (Ibid.) Therefore, he believed that the questions on which the two nations, Hindu and Muslim, could unite were only social questions. Then, he regretted the fact that this Congress was a political organization. (Ibid.)

Moreover, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan argued that there was almost no political claim made by the Indian National Congress to which the Muslims of India were not opposed. For instance, about the demands of the Congress regarding the enlargement of the Legislative Council based on the system of representation by election, or the principle of one man one vote, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan said that it would jeopardize the interests of the Muslims of India, given the fact that the latter were numerically smaller than the Hindu majority. As he put it:

... whatever system of election be adopted, there will be four times as many Hindus as Mohammedans, and all their demands will be gratified and the power of legislation will be in the hands of Bengalis or of Hindus of the Bengali type and the Mohammedans will fall into a condition of utmost degradation. (Quoted in, *Ibid.*)

In the meantime, undiscouraged by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's vociferous opposition, Badruddin Tyabji delivered a carefully worded speech during his presidentship of the Madras session, where he, among other things, tried hard to persuade the Muslim community to disregard Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's advice and follow his example. In the following passage, which is an excerpt from that speech, he wondered why the Indian Muslims should keep aloof from the Indian National Congress and claimed that the wished-for reforms could only be granted if all Indians, including Muslims, joined hands:

It has been urged in derogation of our character, as a representative national gathering, that one great and important community – the Mussalman community – has kept aloof from the proceedings of the last two Congresses. ... I ... do not consider that there is anything whatever in the position or relations of the different communities in India – be they Hindus, Mussalmans, ... – which should induce the leaders of anyone community to stand aloof from the others in their efforts to obtain those great general reforms which are for the common benefit of us all and which ... have only to be earnestly and unanimously pressed upon government to be granted to us. (Quoted in, Sharma, 14)

The above speech found an echo in the hearts of many of the audience. In retrospect, an article in a local newspaper, the *Times of India* of 29 August 1906, described that historic speech:

Few Presidential Addresses have equalled the one which Mr. Tyabji delivered on that occasion, in the lucid arrangement of facts and cogent reasoning, and it was acknowledged on all hands to be an oratorical effort of high order in the history of the movement. (Saxena, 66)

However, to Badruddin Tyabji's dismay, his speech fell on deaf ears in the Muslim community. And then, to add insult to injury, following that speech, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wrote him a letter on 24 January 1888, in which he reprimanded him for having presided over the Congress' session. The first paragraph of the letter read as follows:

The fact that you took a leading part in the Congress at Madras has pleased our Hindu fellow subjects no doubt but as to ourselves it has grieved us much.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Badruddin Tyabji. Quoted in, *Ibid.*, (appendix vi).

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan continued his letter by stating that he could never understand the words “National Congress”, whereas, in his view, the Indian Subcontinent is full of creeds whose aims and aspirations could by no means be the same. According to Madhu Limaye, this was seen by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as an “unfair and unwarrantable interference with his nation.” (Limaye, 141) Then, in a reproachful tone, he castigated Badruddin Tyabji for regarding the “misnamed National Congress” as beneficial to India whereas, he continued, it is only injurious to “our own community.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Badruddin Tyabji and those who followed him invited the wrath of many Indian Muslims who were engaged in anti-Congress campaigning. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan went even to the extent of putting into question the use of the word “delegates” for those Muslims who attended the Congress’ sessions. Actually, he objected to the use of the word “delegate” to denote someone who was not designated by members of their community to represent them. In this respect, he pointed out:

... I object to the word ‘delegate’. ... I assure my friend that the Muslims who went from our province ... to attend the Congress at Madras do not deserve the appellation ‘delegate’ ... The Muslims who went there were not elected even by ten Muslims. (Allana, 2)

Then, he concluded: “The unanimous passing of any resolution in the Congress does not make it a National Congress.” (Ibid.)

Angered by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s criticism – and particularly the recent letter – as well as the fierce opposition among the Muslim community – which grew very intense by the end of the 1880’s— (Rahman, 5), Badruddin Tyabji, more restive than ever, wrote a letter to Allen Octave Hume in which he declared:

The main object of the Congress to unite different communities and provinces had miserably failed and the Mohammedans were divided from the Hindus in a manner as never before; that the gulf was becoming wider day by day. (Quoted in, Sharma, 14)

In addition, Badruddin Tyabji further suggested to Allen Octave Hume that the Indian National Congress be prorogued, that is, discontinued without dissolving, for a period of five years. (Ibid.) Then, he said point-blank:

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Badruddin Tyabji. Quoted in, Vinod Kumar Saxena, *op. cit.*, (appendix vi).

The fact exists and whether we like it or not, we must base our proceedings upon the fact that an overwhelming majority of Mahomedans are against the movement... If then the Mussalman community as a whole is against the Congress ... it follows that the movement *ipso facto* ceases to be general, or National Congress. (Rahman, 5)<sup>3</sup>

According to Matur Rahman, Badruddin Tyabji's above recommendations were completely disregarded by the Congress leaders, who went on determinedly trying, in vain though, to rally support from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's co-religionists. (Ibid.)<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, anti-Congress Muslim campaigning was so strong that Allen Octave Hume, himself, once thought of suspending it. Yet, though this did not occur, its activities were "slackened". (Muhammad, xxv)<sup>5</sup>

To put it all in a nutshell, Badruddin Tyabji was one of the very few high-profile Muslim intellectuals in British India who dared challenge the mainstream thinking among the Muslims of India who were, on the whole, under the influence of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Badruddin Tyabji could only see common interests between Muslims and Hindus and for that he made a great deal of effort to see both communities come together for a common cause. Eventually, this anti-communalist position made him face an avalanche of opprobrium from a large section of his community.

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<sup>3</sup> Hafeez Malik reported on Badruddin Tyabji as having told Hume in the same letter that if the Muslims did not join the Indian National Congress, it would be better to "drop it with dignity", being conscious of the fact that they had done their best for the sake of their country. (Malik, 284)

<sup>4</sup> According to Vinod Kumar Saxena, the Congress leaders resorted to the press to persuade Muslim youth to join the Congress. For instance, editor Munshi Ganga Prasad, an important Congress leader as well as one of the founders of the *Advocate* of Lucknow published in English, addressed a letter to the students of the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, in which he pleaded with the Muslim students to join the Indian National Congress. The following is an excerpt from that letter: "Born in India, living in India, for whom else you will work but for India? ... Why should not the Hindus and Musulmans clap hands in brotherly affection and work harmoniously together for the common salvation." (Saxena, 92-93)

<sup>5</sup> It should be mentioned that among those Indian Muslims who joined the Indian National Congress, there were some who were bent on serving the interests of their community. For instance, one of these was Hidayet Rasul who, during the 1889 Congress session at Allahabad, demanded that the number of Muslims in the Legislative Councils should always be equal to that of the Hindus. (Rahman, 5)



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