

SIR AZIZUL HAQUE, THE FIRST SPEAKER OF THE BENGAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY: A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

Sir Muhammad Azizul Haque (1892-1947) was one of the few Muslim intellectuals, writers and thinkers who emerged in Bangladesh in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was the Education Minister of undivided Bengal and the first Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. He was later appointed India's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. As Speaker, he conducted the Assembly in a very efficient manner and accorded due respect to all present. Since 1937, the Speaker is addressed to the President of the Assembly. The Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, on the one hand, and the Muslim League, on the other, were the two major political parties. It was the absolute responsibility of the Speaker to calm down these two warring political parties and resolve all the issues in an impartial manner. Sir Azizul Haque was able to perform this responsibility very competently. Later, he was considered the best speaker among the speakers of the provinces of India. Azizul Haque was able to establish a tradition of running the assembly. Many of his rulings and decisions are cited in other provinces of India and even in the Central Parliament. Azizul Haque's impartiality in the conduct of the Assembly's business was also unquestionable. Although a member of the Muslim League, he kept a distance from party politics. The Assembly of Bengal is largely considered to be the pioneer of the parliamentary structure in India, and the Speakers and legislators of this phase played a special role behind it. Various parliamentary customs and practices were introduced during this period. Sir Azizul Haque had an excellent ability to run the parliament.

He was respected by the government and the opposition. His various rulings are still cited as examples.

Keywords: Sir Azizul Haque, Speaker, Muslim League, Education Minister, Department of Islamic History and Culture, Coalition-Cabinet, High Commissioner

Sir Muhammad Azizul Haque (1892-1947) was one of the few Muslim intellectuals, writers and thinkers who emerged in Bangladesh in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During his student days, he took an active part in student politics during his stay at the Baker Hostel in Kolkata. Before the establishment of British rule in India, the influence of Muslims in the political and social spheres gradually disappeared after the establishment of British rule. In this situation, the fact that it was possible to save the Muslim community from collapse and to cooperate with the British was gradually realized by some thoughtful people like Sir Azizul Haque. He was the Education Minister of undivided Bengal and the first Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. He was later appointed India's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. As Speaker, he conducted the Assembly in a very efficient manner and accorded due respect to all present.

Socio-Economic Condition of Muslims in Bengal:

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Muslims of Bengal and India suffered from political vacuum, lack of economic stability and social crisis. The Bengali Muslim community lagged in everything - philosophy, science, art. The way in which wealth and prosperity come is close to them. So, the question arises, before the rule of the English East India Company, the Muslim community which was at the forefront of the society in the work, in the nobility, why did they lag after the arrival of the British? Recent studies of Bengali Muslims show that they were highly dispersed. The unity that developed between them through common adherence to the Islamic faith was unclear. There was considerable economic disparity among the Muslim community. At the top were a small number of large landowners and at the bottom were many poor peasants. As Bengal fell into the hands of the British, there were many fissures in the Muslim society, especially in the educational, literary and cultural aspects. The Muslims always thought and knew that they were the ruling class and the caste of the kings of India. They were particularly hostile to the English because they blamed them for their political overthrow. Therefore, they avoided coming under the influence of the new culture and education introduced by the British in India and firmly adhered to orthodox Islam. (Mondal, 2012, pp. 99-101)

By the middle of the 19th century, some thinking people in the Muslim community realized that this could not go on - the Muslim community had to learn English to survive, get acquainted with modern knowledge and science, and extend a helping hand to the ruling class. This attitude was reflected in the Bengali Muslim society in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The most notable in this regard is Sir Azizul Haque. In the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the urban educated Muslim community realized that it was not possible to survive in opposition to the colonial rulers, even if the English were the main enemy, but the cooperation of the ruling class was necessary to enjoy material benefits and progress. The ruling class should also be generous towards the Muslim community at this time. (Mondal, 2012, pp. 104-107)

Azizul Haque: Education Reformer to Politician:

Sir Azizul Haque was born in 1892 in the post office area of Santipur in the Ranaghat subdivision of the then Nadia district of Bengal. All the members of his family were highly intelligent and devoted to Islam. His paternal uncle was the renowned educationist, litterateur and poet Mohammad Mozammel Haque (1860-1933). During his student days, he took an active part in student politics during his stay at the Baker Hostel in Kolkata. (Rahman, 1994, p. 9) He started his legal practice at Krishnanagar in Nadia district in 1915 and was soon promoted to the rank of Public Prosecutor. In 1926, the British government conferred on him the title of Khan Bahadur, and in the same year he was elected vice-chairman of the Nadia District Board and a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. He was re-elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1929. In this election, Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Haque supported him. (Nag, 1998, p. 20) In 1934, he was appointed as the Education Minister of the then Government of Bengal. On assuming office, he first carried out reforms in primary education and launched a massive programme to eradicate illiteracy from the country. In 1938, Sir Azizul Haque was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. After assuming charge, a new department named 'Department of Islamic History and Culture' was born in the University of Calcutta. (Ali, 1973, pp. 103-104) According to the Government of India Act of 1935, the first elections held in Bengal in 1937, no party was able to secure a single majority, making an alliance to form a government inevitable. Finally, on 2 March 1937, the first coalition-cabinet of Bengal was formed with the Krishak Praja Party, Muslim League and other parties under the leadership of Fazlul Haque and Khan Bahadur Azizul Haque was elected as the first speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly with a maximum of 116 votes. (Rahman, 2013, pp. 77-79)

Duties and Responsibilities of Sir Azizul Haque as Speaker:

Since 1937, the Speaker is addressed to the President of the Assembly. Sir Azizul Haque was the first elected Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Azizul Haque was first elected as a member of the district board. He was also the Tagore Law Professor at the University of Calcutta for a few years. He was forced to resign due to his political views. He was a member of the Assembly for 15 years. He was twice appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, once as Education Minister, and later as High Commissioner of India to Britain. He was also a member of the Franchise Committee. Azizul Haque's opponents in the 1937 Speaker's election were the Congress-backed Shibashekhar Roy (against whom the Swarajis had brought a no-confidence motion in 1926, who was favored by Lord Ripon) and Tamizuddin Khan of the Swatantra Krishak Praja Dal. Azizul Haque got the highest 116 votes, Shibashekhar Roy 83 and Tamizuddin Khan 42. (Datta, 1995, p. 191)

The Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, on the one hand, and the Muslim League, on the other, were the two major political parties. It was the absolute responsibility of the Speaker to calm down these two warring political parties and resolve all the issues in an impartial manner. Sir Azizul Haque was able to perform this responsibility very competently. Later, he was considered the best speaker among the speakers of the provinces of India. (Ali, 1973, pp. 103-104)

During the time of Sir Azizul Haque, the assembly was in turmoil. The kind of problems that Azizul Haque had to solve, none of the previous principals had to do it. On the one hand, there were Sarat Chandra Bose, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Nalinaksh Sanyal, Kiranshankar Roy and Abu Hossain Sarkar of Swatantra Krishak Praja Dal, Asimuddin. On the other hand, Muslim League members like Fazlul Huq, Nazimuddin, Surabardi, Abdul Bari, Fazlur Rahman and Abul Hashem were also present on the government side. Even in the face of the final provocation, Azizul Haque was able to keep the assembly under his control. He was sympathetic to the opposition. He believed that for a democratic institution like the Assembly to function properly, the minorities and the opposition should be kept in mind. Azizul Haque used to say, "The majority has the power to vote, the minority should be given the power to speak." The opposition is getting more patronage from the principal; Fazlul Haque can be heard making such mild allegations. However, all political parties and groups in the assembly could rely on Azizul Haque. Everyone used to admit that Azizul Haque's management system has been able to maintain the parliamentary democratic atmosphere in the assembly to a great extent. As Speaker, he was restrained but firm on the discipline of the assembly. (Datta, 1995, p. 191)

Azizul Haque was able to establish a tradition of running the assembly. Many of his rulings and decisions are cited in other provinces of India and even in the Central Parliament. He made a list of some words which are against the parliamentary system. Azizul Haque opined that the decisions of the political party and the party activities of the minister cannot be mentioned in the assembly. Azizul Haque's ruling is also important on whether the government is obliged to resign if the retrenchment proposal is accepted. In this context, the Whig party in England was defeated in the Commons 58 times between 1834-1840. During Macdonald's premiership from January to August 1924, the governing party lost the vote 10 times but did not resign. Azizul Haque also reviewed the statement of constitutional expert Jennings and ruled that the question of resignation can arise if there is a policy question involved in the retrenchment proposal or if an important issue comes to the fore. However, everything will depend on how the government sees the matter, i.e. the final decision to resign based on the retrenchment proposal can only be taken by the government. (Datta, 1995, pp. 192-193)

As a speaker, Azizul Haque was slow, tolerant and restrained. He wasn't easily discouraged. Besides, he was an excellent orator and could speak English fluently. He was also known for his knowledge of Parliament, humor and witty remarks, and was admired by members of the government and opposition. Nalinaksha Sanyal used to embarrass the principal by repeatedly raising the point of order. Once Nalinaksha said, "I will not raise a point of order if you are annoyed." Azizul Haque said that he benefited from Nalinaksha's point of order, but Nalinaksha also thought about the direction of the principal. (Datta, 1995, p. 192)

Azizul Haque's impartiality in the conduct of the Assembly's business was also unquestionable. Although a member of the Muslim League, he kept a distance from party politics. Home Minister Nazimuddin wrote to Jinnah that despite being a member of the Muslim League, Azizul Haque was completely indifferent to the League, and his behavior was beyond explanation. "He has disappointed all of us". Despite the Muslim League's request, Azizul Haque did not agree to suspend the assembly session. Azizul Haque's contribution to the reconstruction of the assembly office was also outstanding. In the face of extreme provocation, Azizul Haque could be heard saying that his eyesight and hearing were limited to the four walls of the assembly while sitting in the chair. Apart from the assembly, he does not see anything, he does not hear anything. (Datta, 1995, p. 193)

It has been a long-standing practice of the Assembly to take up condolence motions. But the uniqueness of the assembly of this phase can be seen in tribute to the sages leaving aside the tradition. The obituary references to Jagadish Chandra Bose, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore are unique in one word. Principal Azizul Haque himself took the initiative

to write these proposals. After the death of Rabindranath Tagore on August 12, 1941, in the presence of the largest number of legislators, on behalf of the people of Bengal, Principal Azizul Haque said in his tribute to Kabiguru that not only the cultural world is empty in Rabindra's death, but humanity is also destitute today. After all, those of us who have learnt to love the country from the poet, to be proud of our heritage and environment, are stunned today. The poet's words will inspire us, "we will live with him for the next few centuries" - he said. (Datta, 2002, pp. 141-142)

The Assembly of Bengal is largely considered to be the pioneer of the parliamentary structure in India, and the Speakers and legislators of this phase played a special role behind it. Various parliamentary customs and practices were introduced during this period. Sir Azizul Haque had an excellent ability to run the parliament. He was respected by the government and the opposition. His various rulings are still cited as examples. (Datta, 2002, p. 142)

It will not be irrelevant to mention that during the colonial period, the administrative skills, ruling, decisions, etc. of the principals like Ivan Cotton, Azizul Haque, Jalaluddin Hashemi, Nausher Ali, etc. gave special status to the assembly of Bengal. Bengal was a model for other Indian states. (Datta, 2002, p. 309) There has been talk of placing the Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly above neutral party politics a few times, but it remained at the level of discussion. Even after half a century of independence, the Speakers of the Central and State Legislatures are still purely party candidates. All the political parties admit that it is a hindrance to the proper functioning of the parliamentary structure, but the political leadership has still failed to dictate a solution. (Datta, 2002, p. 310)

Azizul Haque resigned after being appointed India's High Commissioner to the UK. He is respected by all parties and communities. "In your absence, the glory of this House will largely fade" said David Henry, a lawmaker. (Datta, 2002, p. 302) After Azizul Haque was appointed High Commissioner in London, Deputy Speaker Jalaluddin Hashemi (1942-1943) managed the affairs of the meeting with great achievement. (Datta, 2002, p. 291)

After all, just as Sir Azizul Haque's skill and talent were recognized in his career, his simple and sweet behaviour in social life was also highly appreciated. He played an important role as an orator and a brilliant logician. (Nag, 1998, p. 21) He was a marvelous worker. No amount of work or trouble could dissuade him. His life has been full of success. No matter how many responsibilities he was entrusted with, he could accomplish them with great efficiency. He made a special place in the political life of Bengal, due to which he became dear to everyone. Above

all, those who came to him could not fail to be impressed by his behaviour, as his great personality was reflected in his efficiency and diligence. (Ali, 1973, pp. 106-107) As the first Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, he showed great ability and skill. Sir Azizul Haque is remembered for his important role in spreading education and securing political rights for the deprived and oppressed Muslim community of India. (Rahman, 1994, p. 12)

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