



Sir Mohammad Shafi and Muslim Separatism in British India: An Analysis

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Abstract:

The general objective of this study is to analyze the role of the Muslim leader, Sir Muhammad Shafi, for Muslim separatism in British India, in general, and making the way out for a separate Muslim state, in particular. He was a famous Muslim politician who had represented the Muslim community for about forty years (1892-1932). Long before the formation of the All-India Muslim League, he advocated for Muslim rights. His contribution cannot be ignored in the context of leveling the ground for the Muslim state. Shafi was one of those Muslims who perceived very early the alarming situation of the Muslim in political life and process and made efforts to help found the All-India Muslim League. Shafi also made a strong appeal for more provincial autonomy not only for the Punjab but also for other provinces. In his beliefs of separate Muslim representation, he, even, went against the progressive leadership within the ranks and profile of the All-India Muslim League.

Keywords: Separate Electorate, Nationalism, Political Development, British, Muslim Separatism

INTRODUCTION

Sir Mohammad Shafi was nominated to the Viceroy's Executive Council in July 1919, first as an education member and, later in 1921, as Law Member till 1924. In the process, he was more concerned with the official policies set by the government. However, he never lost contact with the greater political issues affecting his community. Some of the more important issues were the 1919 Reforms, Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement, Delhi Muslim proposals, and Simon Commission. However, in dealing with these issues, he developed major difference with the All-India Muslim League (AIML) leadership, especially Jinnah, and, eventually, split the League.

Chelmsford Montagu-Reforms 1919 and Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement

The Lucknow Pact and the demand for self-government in India were followed by a historic announcement of the British policy in India. In August 1917, the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, promised a self-governing institution of the forthcoming constitutional reforms (Hayat & Zahid 1988: 113). Montagu also visited India and consulted with the government and political leaders, both from the All India National Congress (AINC) and the AIML (Abid 1997: 57). In the process, he also met with Shafi and presented space for communal electorates, and pleaded the

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Punjab case demand “that the real powers in councils rest with the rural classes and 45% by the Muslim share” (Abid 1992: 18).

Montagu formulated four principles as a result of his meeting in India which comprised; possibly complete control in local bodies; some sort of responsible government; enlargement of the Indian Legislative Council; control of the parliament and the Secretary of State over the Government of India (Khan 1985: 319).

Shafi was pleased with this development and felt that it was “a generous fulfillment of the solemn promise made in the declaration of the 20th August” (Bahadur 1988:109). He went on the review of Montagu-Chelmsford for report in a series of articles published in the *Civil and Military Gazette* columns. In the last article, he compared this report with the Minto-Morley Reforms and claimed to cooperate with the government. He wrote:

To my countryman, I appeal with equal earnestness to recognize that our British fellow-subjects in India have as permanent interest in her future well-being as ourselves...let us realize that in their cooperation and goodwill for India’s regeneration lies our sure and certain success along the path of constitutional development... let us then sink our differences, unite in welcoming the Chelmsford-Montagu scheme of Reforms and thereafter when it is brought in to operation, extend our fullest measure of cooperation to its successful working. Thus, along we deserve the confidence which the British Parliament is about to place in us: thus alone shall we strengthen our countries claim to full responsible government (Shafi 1930: 259-260).

According to the Reform Act of 1919, a system “Dyarchy” was introduced in the province, and weightage was provided to minorities in the majority provinces. Although Shafi was not in favour of the weightage system, *per se*, he and Jinnah and Fazli Husain decided to go along with it (Wasti 1876: 211). Unfortunately, before introducing the reforms, Rowlatt Bill was introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council, which gave draconian power to the government. (Sayeed 1968: 46) This was all the more unfortunate because, given all their support during World War I, the Indian people generally expected better understanding and appreciation from the British government. In exasperation, they started country-wide agitation against the Rowlatt Bill. Even Shafi, who was then a member of the Imperial Legislative Council, was left with no option but to oppose the Bill. As he put it:

My Lord, I was a member of the Legislative Council, before the Morley Minto Reforms Scheme. Since then, I have been a member either of a Provincial Legislative Council or of the Imperial Legislative Council; I do not recollect a single occasion on which a government measure has been opposed with such complete unanimity amongst non-official members belonging to every shade of political opinion, as in this particular instance (Puri 1985: 155).

Shafi voted against the Bill, but he advised against adopting a harsh policy by the government. Instead, he stressed cooperation between the government and the political leaders (*Paisa-Akhbar*, 24th March 1919). While giving evidence before the Hunter Committee, after the Jalianwala Bagh tragedy, he assured the government that there was no conspiracy to subvert the British rule and that most people remained loyal during the disturbances (*Paisa-Akhbar*, 3 November, 1920). Of course, this was his whole political philosophy that the Muslims should be loyal to the British, and both the Muslims and the British should cooperate and work together. In this sense, although he

was interested in the Khilafat question, he strongly opposed accompanying Non-Cooperation Movement started by Gandhi. In his opinion:

.... no effort by a section of educated Indians, however, well-organized could in the condition thus existing, succeed in bringing about even a partial deadlock of the kind contemplated by Mr. Gandhi and his followers; liberals and conservatives could seek election to the Councils and not a single seat would remain vacant (Shafi 1930: 5).

After World War I, Turkey was among the defeated powers, and there were reports that she should be deprived of her non-Turkish areas. The Indian Muslims had great apprehensions and anxiety over the future of Khilafat and Holy Places. They demanded that powers of Khilafat should not be curtailed and the Holy Places of Muslims not be handed over to the non-Muslims (Prasad 2000: 54). Instead of favourably responding to the Muslim demand, Turkey was deprived of all the non-Turkish territories, resultantly, the Indian Muslims joined the Non-Cooperation Movement. Shafi was strongly supportive to Muslim aspiration, but he sought their realization through constitutional means and without offending the British government. He remained in constant contact with the Viceroy Lord Reading, who was keen to detach Muslims from the Non-Cooperation Movement. Shafi kept him informed about the Muslim feelings over the Khilafat question and also the extent of the Muslim involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement. He tried to explain that the Muslims were involved because they sought the protection of Ottoman Khilafat. And this had made the Movement successful (Prasad 2000: 173-77; Hamid 1971: 34-35). He, therefore, argued that the Muslims might withdraw their support if the Turkish Peace Treaty was modified in favour of the Turks. Soon, however, the Treaty of Lausanne replaced the Treaty of Sevres, and in this way, the most important demand of the Indian Muslims concerning the issues was met. Consequently, the moderate Muslims moved away from the Non-Cooperation Movement (Prasad 2000: 173-77; Hamid 1971: 34-35).

Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council

Soon after he was appointed a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in July 1919, Shafi became inactive in politics, but continued his efforts for the welfare of Indian Muslims. As an Education Member (1919-1921), he took a great deal of interest in the educational needs of the Muslims. He realized that their political backwardness was the result of lack of education as compared to the Hindu community. During his stay in the office, many improvements in the field of education were made. For instance, he introduced, on 27th August 1920, the Muslim University Bill in the Indian Legislative Council to establish and incorporate a teaching and residential Muslim University at Aligarh. While discussing the Bill in the Legislative Council, he paid homage to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who had established the M.A.O. College Aligarh and had indeed devoted considerable time and energy for the educational regeneration of the Indian Muslims. The Council finally passed the Bill on 9th September 1920 (Halim 1970: 263). Besides, he got approved by five more universities, including the Banares, Delhi, and Dacca (Dhaka) universities (Shahnawaz 1971: 67-68).

Shafi made great efforts for the Dacca University. He protested against the negative attitude of Madan Mohan Malaviya during the discussion on the Bill of the said University. He lamented that there was opposition despite the so-called enthusiasm for Hindu Muslim Unity (*Paisa Akhbar*, 29th March 1919). However, the select committee of the House voted in favour of the Bill. Resultantly,

the House also approved the establishment of the University at Dacca (*Paisa Akhbar*, 29th March 1919). It was due to the selfless struggle of Shafi that the Muslim community was able to secure its interests in the field of education.

As a Law Member (1921-1924), Shafi supported the Bar Council Reforms in the Law Department and pleaded the case of immediate further reforms in the Viceroy's Executive Council. When the Reforms Enquiry Committee was appointed in May 1924, under the chairmanship of Alexander Muddiman, Shafi was included as an official member of the committee to represent the Muslims' point of view (Page 1982: 114-15). However, the official and non-official members could not agree on some issues. Hence, separate reports were submitted, called the majority and minority reports, respectively. The official majority report expressed its satisfaction with the 1919 Reforms. It also approved the separate electorate system, although it saw the system more as "a necessary evil." Besides, it recommended a plan of entrusting to the local governments any future recruitment in services. No official member demanded provincial autonomy and responsible government at the center (Salamat 1997: 295-97). On the other hand, the minority report insisted on provincial autonomy and responsible government at the center. It rejected the system of "Dyarchy" as inadequate and unacceptable. It warned that merely reproducing the existing Act in any future constitutional reforms would be disastrous. The majority report was condemned by almost all the political circles (Abid 1999: 52). Shafi had supported the official point of view. However, he did not hesitate to dissociate himself from the majority report after leaving the Viceroy's Executive Council (Hamid 1970: 384).

Delhi Muslim Proposals 1927

After completing his term with the Viceroy's Executive Council, Shafi returned to active politics in 1924 (Baxter 1985: 61). He revived and re-constituted the Punjab Muslim League and, in 1927, was elected its President (Salamat 1997: 299). He had already become active in AIML affairs and even attended its annual session in December 1924. He was made a member of the League Committee to inquire into Muslim demands, including representation in legislatures and local bodies (Pirzada 1967: 28). Based on its recommendation, the annual session of the AIML in December 1925 adopted a resolution highlighting the need for separate electorates, provincial autonomy, and a genuine federation in India (Moore 1974: 24).

In its annual session of December 1926, the AIML reaffirmed its resolution passed in December 1925, and further demanded full responsible government as its primary objective. In this context, it also called for the revision of the Government of India Act 1919 and demanded the appointment of a Royal Commission to formulate a scheme for further reforms after due consultations with political leaders (Mitra 1990: 375-76). However, it was emphasized that any future scheme must also consider the following principles: 1) adequate representation of minorities, without affecting the position of a given majority in any province; 2) any territorial readjustment should not affect the Muslim majority in the Punjab, Bengal, and North West Frontier Province (NWFP); 3) complete religious freedom; and 4) that no bill should be passed against the wishes of three-fourth members of any one community (Sherwani 1987: 389). The AIML also appointed central and provincial committees to consider these issues further by consulting other political parties so that a joint stand could be presented before the Royal Commission. Shafi was a member of both the Central and the Punjab Committee (Pirzada 1967: 103).

In the same session, Jinnah forcefully argued the case of separate electorates. He asserted that the so-called nationalism could not be created through joint or mixed electorates. He gave the example of Canada, where separate electorates were not an obstacle in the country's progress. He asked the Hindus to be more responsive to the Muslim demands, settle the differences amicably, and help formulate a common platform so that the struggle for the responsible government could succeed. He also advised the Muslims to work hard to articulate and place their demands before the Commission (Sherwani 1987: .390). In this context, he stressed the need for greater cooperation with the AINC in advancing India's cause as a whole.

Unfortunately, however, India's communal situation was rapidly deteriorating in the wake of riots and violence after the failure of the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement. The AINC even claimed that the separate electorates were the major cause of communal trouble in India (Abid 1992: 118). The AINC wanted to eliminate separate electorates before the appointment of the Royal Commission. Indeed, the severe pressure forced Muslim leaders to consider the possibilities of joint electorates, under certain conditions. These leaders, particularly those who were a member of the Legislative Council met under the presidentship of Jinnah in March 1927, (Salamat 1997: 299) and made an offer to give up separate electorates, provided.

... if the Hindu accept, inter alia the separation of Sindh from Bombay presidency; political reforms in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan to Bring them at par with other provinces in India (under the Act of 1919); the proportion of representation in the Punjab and Bengal following their population and one-third representation in the central legislature (Hayat 1998: 19).

Jinnah intended to put these proposals before several Muslim organizations, including the Council of the AIML, after he had gained the response of other organizations first (*Civil and Military Gazette*, 30,31 March 1927). Soon, he got a positive response from the AINC Working Committee which passed a unanimous resolution accepting the proposals. But, Jinnah's optimism was short-lived. The AINC, too, under pressure from the Mahasabha, withdrew its earlier support, (Wolpert 1993: 95) and thus, the matter could not persuade any further.

Shafi who had represented the Muslims of Punjab had fully agreed with the initiative in the Delhi meeting (Hayat 1998: 106). However, soon after his return from Delhi, he changed his mind. He had come to know about Mahasabja's reaction. He too rejected the proposals. In this context, he had the support of Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Fazli Husain, who were critical of the proposals in the first place (*Civil and Military Gazette*, 30, March 1927). However, at a general meeting of the Punjab Provincial Muslim League held in May 1927, Shafi strongly condemned the behaviour of the Hindu press and the Mahasabha (Salamat 1997: 301). He agreed that self-government was possible only through Hindu-Muslim unity, but for now, he reiterated that the separate electorates were imperative and thus could not be dispensed with. He asked the Mahasabha to be more responsive and understanding. Indeed, he warned:

Until the mentality of the Hindu Mahasabha undergoes, the necessary change and that body come to realize that without Hindu-Muslim unity the attainment of Swaraj for our common motherland is an absolute impossibility. The Muslim community will continue to insist on the retention of separate communal electorates as an integral part of the Indian constitution. (*Indian Quarterly Register, January-June 1927:42*).

In addition to his disappointment with the Mahasabha's attitude, Shafi changed his mind about the Delhi Proposals in part due to the harsh and threatening letters he received from the Muslims all over India. However, it must be pointed out that there were several other Muslim leaders too who changed their minds, after seeing the negative response from the AINC and the Mahasabha (Page 1982: 148).

The opposition of the Muslims of Punjab to the Delhi Proposal gained strength with time. Jinnah visited Lahore to assess the situation himself. He did his best "to prevent the Provincial League from taking an independent line on the question of the electorates...but he failed" (Abid 1992: 120). Punjabi Muslims were not interested in giving up a separate electorate at any cost then. In addition to Shafi, Feroz Khan Noon was at the forefront. Under his leadership, twenty-seven members of the Punjab Legislative Council made a declaration rejecting the Delhi Proposals. They reiterated their firm commitment to separate electorate (*Civil and Military Gazette*, 26, July 1927). The Provincial Government of Punjab also supported these views (Salamat 1997: 302).

Simon Commission

Amid the atmosphere of Hindu-Muslim conflict in which the Muslims were also divided on the issue of separate electorates, Viceroy announced the Constitution Committee headed by Sir John Simon on 8th November 1927. The Commission's appointment, popularly known as the Simon Commission, was condemned both by the AINC and the AIML. As it had no Indian representation, the Punjab Muslim League was receptive. It was willing to cooperate and help. Malcolm Haily, the Punjab Governor was at its back. He knew he could take advantage of the difference within AIML (*Inqilab*, 11th November 1927). He encouraged Feroz Khan Noon to arrange a meeting of influential Muslims of Punjab at the residence of Shafi, to garner support for the Commission. As expected, Shafi welcomed the Commission and vowed to cooperate with it fully (*Inqilab*, 12th November 1927).

Soon after, Shafi called a meeting of the Punjab Muslim League and helped pass a resolution saying that "under the prevailing circumstances boycott of the Simon Commission was detrimental to the best interests of the country in general and the community in particular" (Salamat 1997: 305). In all these moves, of course, Shafi had not consulted the central leadership of AIML.

The Split within the ranks of the AIML widened over the venue of the forthcoming annual session of the party. Shafi succeeded in getting Lahore, approved as the venue. However, since Shafi was to preside it, Jinnah and many other leaders were not happy with the decision. They knew Shafi's mind and the decision of the Punjab League to support the Commission. Saifuddin Kitchlew, the General Secretary of the AIML called another meeting of the Council to reconsider its earlier decision. He justified it on the ground that Shafi had agreed to step down if Agha Khan was invited to preside and to support the issue of separate electorates (*Civil and Military Gazette*, 268 December 1927). Besides, Saifuddin Kitchlew pointed out that he had received several letters and telegrams to revise the decision. Raja Sahib of Mehmoodabad and Maulvi Muhammad Yaqub wrote that the AIML would go into the hand of "reactionaries" if the session was held at Lahore (Abid 1992: 127-28).

Noon presented the group in the Council meeting. However, he failed to carry the day. The venue of the next session was shifted to Calcutta. However, in the spirit of compromise, Shafi was retained as President for this session. But Shafi was not satisfied with the outcome. He called a meeting of the

Punjab Muslim League, which, as expected, criticized the Delhi decision sharply. It further resolved that a separate session would be held in Lahore, as announced earlier (Prasad 2000: 276). In fact, this decision divided AIML into two groups. First group known as the conservatives led by Shafi, that believed in cooperation with the British and separate electorates. While the second group known as progressive and nationalists led by Jinnah, believed in the Hindu-Muslim unity not only for the sake of the Muslims but also for the sake of India.

The Calcutta session of the AIML, then held under Muhammad Yaqub's chairmanship, decided that Indian Muslims would have nothing to do with the Simon Commission. A resolution was also passed suggesting that separate electorates would be abandoned only if the Delhi Proposals were accepted by the Hindus in their entirety. In another resolution, Shafi was held responsible for the differences and disputes in the League. He and his colleagues were condemned, and the Punjab league was promptly disaffiliated. It was said that the Punjab Muslims know how to deal with him and his colleagues (Al-Majahid 1990: 100).

On the other hand, the Lahore session of the AIML held under the presidentship of Shafi offered a different perspective. Shafi himself, in his presidential address, stressed:

I am sincerely convinced that in the existing political conditions in this country, joint electorates, whether with or without reserved seats would be certain to furnish a periodical cause of friction between the two communities, and would, in consequence, be in the highest degree injurious to the cause of Indian nationalism (*Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1927*, p.453).

As regards the Simon Commission, he called upon all concerned parties to settle their differences and present a united demand before it. "A unanimous demand thus made," he went on to argue, "would be irresistible, no matter what the constitution of the Royal Commission might be" (*Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1927*, p.453). As for the new constitution for India, a joint effort was recommended in a resolution, "adequate safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of all communities, for presenting the same before the statutory commission of the British Parliament of them both" (*Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1927*: 454). This resolution was severely opposed by the Khilfatists, present in the session. They even proposed an amendment to delete the second part of the resolution. But the original resolution was passed and the Khilfatists walked out in protest (*Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1927*: 455).

In another resolution, passed in the session, it was declared that neither the proposals by some Muslim leaders in their capacities at Delhi in March 1927 nor their amended form, passed by the AINC session at Madras, was acceptable to the Indian Muslims (Pirzada 1967: 135). Furthermore, the Calcutta session of AIML was declared illegal, hence new office bearers were elected. Although Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan protested against the election and said that Jinnah was the AIML's President, he did not find much support, and the resolution in favor of new-office bearers was carried out (Pirzada 1967: 137). Shafi group had no interest in agreement and reconciliation with the AIML, at least for now. Shafi, Allama Iqbal, and Maulana Hasrat Mohani were elected President, General Secretary, and Joint Secretary of the break-away league, respectively. One important aspect of the League's Lahore session was the support of important Muslim politicians of United Province (UP) to the Shafi Group (Page 1982: 161). This alliance between the two provinces was later seen in the emergence of the All-India Muslim Conference (AIMC). The bone of contention between Shafi's

group and others was the separate electorates. Jinnah felt that by gaining five full-fledged Muslim-majority provinces, as given in the Delhi Proposals, the Muslims would be able to safeguard and promote their political interests in India.

Despite his difference with Jinnah and the AIML led by Jinnah, Shafi realized that reaction to the Simon Commission was justified. As he rationalized it; "...resentment is undoubtedly a powerful factor in determining the human course of action and where resentment is due to a joint cause, the tendency to extreme action is not un-natural, particularly in the case of emotional temperaments" (Shafi YEAR: 116-25). He also quickly agreed that the British government had committed a serious mistake by not including Indian representatives among the members of the Commission. But in his opinion, the best way to protest was to hold conferences and convince the government to include Indian representatives in the Commission rather than boycotting it altogether. In his own words; "...instead of raising slogan Simon to go back, it is better to settle unhappy political differences and then raise a united voice pointing out to them in well-reasoned and sober language" (Shafi YEAR: 116-25). He was convinced that the boycotting the Simon Commission would be highly detrimental to India's best interest. He felt that the boycott would not succeed at all. As he put it: "if we can boycott it successfully, then I am sure we would have gained the first step towards self-government. But it is obvious that any action of this nature to be effective must be supported by the united national will, not otherwise" (Shafi YEAR: 116-25).

Shafi, was the staunchest supporter of separate electorates in India, and often used to say that the Muslim would have a joint electorate over his dead body. In his oral evidence before the Commission, he declared that since "1st January 1910, when the separate electorates were launched into operation, nobody had objected whatsoever." It was only after the Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement's failure and the subsequent spate of the communal riots in India that the issue was raised and made controversial. Even the Mahasabha had not raised the issue till 1924 (*Inqilab*, 7th November 1928). He thought the Mahasabha had no case. He insisted that the joint electorates were certain to cause friction between the two communities. In separate electorates, he argued that a Muslim candidate would contest against a Muslim candidate. If any rancor or bitterness was generated, it would not last long, and above all, it would confine to the community itself. In the case of joint electorates, that would be between the two communities, which would be disastrous for the Indian people in the long run.

In his opinion, joint electorates with the reservation of seats would make the matter worse. The majority of Muslims would support the candidate who represented their community. The Hindu majority would try to support a candidate who did not enjoy the community's trust and confidence. The result would be unjust and counter-productive. Indeed, he stressed that mixed electorates and reservations of seat system would be very harmful to the growth of the political institutions (*Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1928*: 112-13).

Shafi also made a strong appeal for more provincial autonomy for the Punjab as well as other provinces of Indian subcontinent. In this context, he was particularly critical of Malaviya and other Mahasabha leaders who had called for the grant of complete autonomy to all the provinces except Punjab. He charged that they were opposing Punjab only because it was the most important Muslim majority province (Shafi, 1930, p.23).

CONCLUSION

Sir Muhammad Shafi cooperated with the Simon Commission in the belief that this would help secure recommendations in favour of Muslims, particularly over the issue of separate electorates. As it has been witnessed all along, Shafi was a powerful advocate of the separate electorates. He was not prepared to make a compromise on this issue at all. Still, whatever his rationale and basis for cooperation with Commission, Shafi was called a stooge of the British. As this was not much helpful with his career even though India's British rule for a long time was almost a foregone conclusion. World War II and its devastating impact on British colonies in general and India, in particular, was beyond anybody's imagination or analysis.

However, neither the cooperation of Shafi nor the boycott of Jinnah and his AIML of the Simon Commission could prove fruitful. The Simon Commission Report, submitted to the Secretary of State for India in May 1930, asked to do away with the separate electorates, with the demanding charge that the communal representation was the direct cause of the tension between the Muslims and the Hindus in India. On the other hand, the report denied responsibility at the centre and even side-tracked the idea of India's federation. Resultantly, the report was unanimously condemned by all Indians, including Muslims, and Hindus. Indeed, it created more problems than it had set out to solve. The most crucial issue remained the communal problem that was further complicated because of this report and the Nehru report prepared by Indian leaders, particularly of the AINC, in opposition to the Simon Commission. The Nehru report re-unified the League and brought Shafi and Jinnah closer in the larger interest of the Muslim community, in the changed circumstances.

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