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2. Congress Response To The Communal Strategies Of Muslim League In 1937 - With Special Reference To Nehru And Jinnah

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Abstract

The April 1937 session of the All-India Muslim League marked a watershed moment when the organization first embraced mass mobilization strategies in its thirty-year existence. Confronting the upcoming provincial elections, the League found itself compelled to actively participate in electoral politics. Meanwhile, Sikandar Hayat Khan's administration in Punjab had implemented measures that were perceived as anti-Congress. The Muslim League positioned itself as an advocate for complete democratic self-governance across India, while simultaneously criticizing those promoting absolute independence as misleading the populace. Muhammad Ali Jinnah argued that Congress leadership, particularly over the preceding decade, had systematically alienated Indian Muslims through policies that appeared exclusively favorable to Hindu interests. Jinnah expressed optimism about achieving Indian federation in the foreseeable future. Provincial League organizations emerged across the subcontinent, from Tamil Nadu's southern regions to the Northwest Frontier Province. The Muslim League unambiguously committed to protecting Muslim rights and interests, while Congress attempted to establish connections with Muslim communities under the pretense of mass outreach, which League leadership viewed as a divisive strategy aimed at fragmenting Muslim unity.

Keywords: *All-India Muslim League, Provincial Assemblies, Sectarian Politics, Gandhi-Irwin Agreement*

Introduction

Beginning in early 1937, significant tensions emerged between League and Congress party workers throughout Punjab province. The Punjab Chief Minister consistently urged Congress activists to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric. His approach manifested through arrests of Congress workers and

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prohibition of various publications and newspapers. The provincial government had adopted repressive policies that paralleled those implemented by previous administrations before April 1937. The Unionist Government in Punjab appeared disconnected from popular needs. An administration primarily focused on glorifying British rule proved incapable of addressing fundamental issues affecting the poor, including poverty, hunger, and unemployment. On October 2, 1937, Nehru released a statement expressing concern that the Punjab Premier had been influenced by biased Criminal Investigation Department reports when ordering prosecutions against provincial Congress members. Sikandar Hayat Khan had implemented anti-Congress suppression measures. Nehru criticized Punjab's electorate for their apparent indifference toward Congress during the elections, suggesting they bore responsibility for subsequent repression. He appealed to Punjab Congress workers to resolve internal differences and accept majority decisions. While conditions had improved in seven provinces with Congress ministries, Punjab remained largely unchanged. Nehru argued that Swaraj had been compromised even in Congress-majority provinces because actual power remained with previous authorities. Nevertheless, a renewed sense of enthusiasm and energy pervaded Congress provinces, with residents overcoming their previous fears. While other provinces released political prisoners and removed restrictions on book and newspaper circulation, Punjab continued imposing additional limitations, proscription orders, and security requirements. Nehru contended that merely passing resolutions condemning the harsh regime imposed by the Unionist ministry was insufficient. He believed Punjab's population needed to actively work toward removing a ministry whose members had launched campaigns against Congress. Nehru acknowledged that Congress had failed to field adequate candidates during elections and expressed surprise at Congress's absence from provincial assembly by-elections. While praising the enrollment of primary members exceeding Punjab's allocated quota, he emphasized the need for expanded Congress committee networks and increased membership throughout the province.¹

The Lucknow Session and League's Political Transformation

The October 1937 Lucknow Session of the All-India Muslim League represented the most crucial gathering in the organization's three-decade history. The policies and programs determined during this session would significantly influence the destiny of Indian Muslims and the broader subcontinent. On April 12, 1937, the Muslim League historically adopted mass contact policies and programs for the first time. Facing the upcoming 1937 elections, the League had no alternative but to engage in electoral competition for Provincial Legislature seats.

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The League recognized that the parliamentary system's introduction required political parties with clearly defined policies and programs. The new 1935 Constitution necessitated electorate education, cooperation between groups with similar objectives, Muslim community solidarity, and ensuring appropriate Muslim representation in provincial governments. This required Muslims to organize as a unified political entity.

Jinnah was appointed to establish a Central Election Board comprising at least thirty-five members, with authority to create and affiliate Provincial Election Boards across various provinces. Following this decision, the Muslim League Central Parliamentary Board was established in June 1936, along with Provincial Boards in various provinces to implement League resolutions and instructions.

Muslims throughout India constituted a numerical minority and faced educational and economic disadvantages. There had been no systematic efforts for their social and economic advancement. Hindus possessed not only numerical superiority but also better training, discipline, and superior educational, economic, and financial resources. Within approximately six months of work, League Parliamentary Boards established in each province secured approximately sixty to seventy percent of contested seats. District Leagues emerged across provinces, from Tamil Nadu's southern regions to the Northwest Frontier Province.

The League aspired to unite India's entire Muslim population under its banner. The Muslim League advocated complete national democratic self-government for India while criticizing those promoting absolute independence as deceptive. The Gandhi-Irwin pact itself was inconsistent with complete independence concepts².

Congress-League Relations and Jinnah's Political Analysis

Jinnah argued that Congress leadership, particularly over the previous decade, had consistently alienated Indian Muslims through exclusively Hindu-oriented policies. Muslims could not expect justice or fair treatment from Congress leadership. Wherever Congress held majorities and found it advantageous, they refused cooperation with Muslim League parties and demanded unconditional surrender and pledge signing.

Jinnah predicted that current Congress party policies would result in class antagonism, communal conflict, and strengthened imperialistic control. The British Government would allow Congress freedom in this direction because Governors and the Governor-General, despite constitutional powers and special responsibilities for minority protection, had failed to utilize their authority effectively².

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Governors had demonstrated complete helplessness and disregard for sacred obligations assumed by the British Government for minority protection. Jinnah urged Muslims to recognize that the time had arrived for concentrated self-organization and full development of their power, excluding all other considerations. One Muslim group supported the British, while another turned toward Congress after losing self-confidence.

Jinnah declared that no settlement with the majority community was possible, as no Hindu leader with genuine authority showed concern or desire for such arrangements. Peace offers from weaker parties always represented weakness confessions and invitations to aggression. He referenced international examples, citing Abyssinia, China, Spain, and Palestine's tragedy.

Jinnah criticized Congress Muslims for preaching unconditional surrender, calling it defeatist mentality and an act of betrayal toward the Muslim community. He advised Muslims to ignore slogans and taunts labeling them as communalists and reactionaries, describing these terms as attempts to create inferiority complexes and demoralize Muslims.

The All-India Muslim League unequivocally committed to safeguarding Muslim rights and interests as its fundamental principle. The League refused to allow Muslim exploitation by either the British Government or any other party or group. Congress's mass contact attempts with Muslims were calculated to divide, weaken, and fragment the Muslim community.

Provincial Politics and Electoral Strategies

In correspondence with Rajendra Prasad, Nehru expressed views regarding potential Muslim League alliances. During Uttar Pradesh's general elections, minimal conflict existed between Congress and the Muslim League. Both parties sought to avoid confrontation and accommodate each other whenever possible.

During early election campaigns, several Muslims with Congress sympathies remained uncertain whether to represent Congress or the League. Without pressure, they likely would have chosen Congress tickets, but lacking such encouragement, they gradually moved toward the League under vague impressions that both options were similar.

The League election board in Uttar Pradesh presented a complex composition, including former Congress members, reactionary elements, and moderate individuals who could align with either side. The primary electoral struggle involved the Agriculturist Party, which represented government-supported large landowners. Since the League also opposed this group, Congress avoided weakening anti-reactionary forces.

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As campaigns progressed, Congress's strength became apparent, leading many Muslims to seek Congress tickets. However, Congress found it inadvisable to provide such tickets. Nehru regretted not running more Congress Muslim candidates. While no formal arrangement existed between Uttar Pradesh Congress and the League, an informal understanding developed.

Nehru praised Maulana Husain Ahmad of the League, who maintained close Congress connections. During tours, Nehru even supported League candidates where no Congress Muslim candidates were available. Post-election tensions emerged within the League as reactionary elements gained influence, straining relations between Uttar Pradesh Congress and League organizations.³

British Administrative Perspective on Political Developments

Emerson reported to Linlithgow about Jawaharlal Nehru's Punjab visit and the All-India Muslim League's Lucknow meeting, where Sir Sikandar played a prominent role. Both events, particularly the latter, significantly impacted all-India politics.

Emerson noted that Nehru's Punjab speeches were more restrained than usual, containing little that would legally justify prosecution. They generally remained within acceptable party political boundaries as understood in England, though people unaccustomed to party politics found his wholesale attacks on the current Ministry deeply offensive.

Resentment among minority government Ministers and supporters was intensified by Congress's unique position. Having Ministries in seven Provinces under central organizational control, with Jawaharlal as head, created particular tensions. Although Jawaharlal held no provincial Ministry position, his campaign was interpreted as directing all Congress forces against non-Congress Provinces, particularly Punjab.

The general interpretation suggested encouraging divisive provincial tendencies. Regarding Ministry attacks, these primarily involved comparisons between Congress Ministries and Punjab's Ministry, greatly favoring the former. Nehru claimed Congress provinces now enjoyed freedom while Punjab experienced the opposite, with police serving as public servants in Congress areas but functioning as reactionary government instruments in Punjab.

During his Punjab visit, Nehru repeatedly stated his refusal to acknowledge any communal problem's existence. Emerson believed Nehru received an effective response at Lucknow several days later. The outstanding impression from Jawaharlal's visit was one of Congress domination and arrogance.

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In his main Hoshiarpur political conference speech, Nehru identified the Punjab Ministry's supreme wickedness as their audacity to attack Congress. This domineering and arrogant spirit caused bitter resentment and most affected Muslims at Lucknow.

Muslim Political Consciousness and Future Implications

Sikandar had decided his position before attending Lucknow. He mentioned to Emerson at Shimla that Jinnah sought his assistance in all-India politics, though discussions remained incomplete. Emerson understood that Sikandar's primary objective was influencing the League against passing complete independence resolutions.

Upon return, Emerson learned that Sikandar had briefly mentioned the matter to Sir Chhotu Ram but had not consulted Sir Sundar Singh and Manohar Lal. He certainly avoided discussions with government supporters generally or the Unionist Party as a whole.

The government took keen interest in assessing Muslim sentiments as interpreted by Sikandar following his Lucknow visit. Although Jinnah's opening address voiced this resentment, actual feelings were stronger than even Jinnah represented. The foundation was Muslim apprehension regarding the future.

In the Muslim perspective, Congress regime in Congress Provinces had been characterized by arrogance and domination. Particular causes of offense included non-inclusion of representative Muslims in Congress Cabinets, flaunting of the Congress flag, prominence given to "Bande Mataram," and attempts to make Hindi the universal language. To Muslims, these were outward signs of Congress intentions to create Hindu raj.

Apparently, some delegates from other Provinces provided concrete examples of Muslim oppression, particularly delegates from Bihar. Sikandar himself admitted that complaints were probably exaggerated, but Muslims everywhere, except in the North-West Frontier Province, were actively seeking grievances against Congress and were predisposed to see nothing positive in Congress Ministry actions.⁴

Conclusion

The resentment among minority government Ministers and supporters was intensified by Congress's distinctive position, maintaining Ministries in seven Provinces under central organizational control with Jawaharlal as head. While in Punjab, Nehru repeatedly denied any communal problem's existence, though Emerson believed he received an effective response at Lucknow.

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The government carefully assessed Muslim sentiments as interpreted by Sikandar following his Lucknow visit. The prevailing impression suggested Congress would cooperate in 1937 elections to gain provincial control, thereby enabling Muslim vote control in those provinces after achieving independence. Sikandar Hayat's apprehensions were exploited by Jinnah to align them with the League's partition objectives.

According to Muslim viewpoint at Lucknow, Congress aimed to first gain provincial control and complete minority domination, especially over Muslims, before driving out the British. If successful, minorities would be at their mercy. In the Muslim view, this Congress policy would inevitably result in civil war. According to this perspective, Punjab and to a lesser extent Bengal would become bulwarks against Congress domination⁴.

This period marked a critical juncture in Indian political development, where communal considerations increasingly influenced electoral strategies and political alliances, ultimately contributing to the subcontinent's eventual partition.

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