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The All-India Sunni Conference and the Making of Pakistan: A Study of Sunni Religious Politics in Late Colonial India

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Abstract

The All India Sunni Conference (AISC) remains a significantly marginalized chapter in the mainstream historiography of the South Asian freedom movement. While dominant narratives focus heavily on either secular elite-led nationalism or the anti-partition theological discourse of nationalist Deobandi ulema, the AISC provided a robust, popular, and deeply theological counter-narrative that mobilized the Sunni (primarily Barelvi / Sufi) masses of late colonial India in favor of Pakistan. This paper examines the AISC's political trajectory through a structured three-part framework: its internal evolution and institutionalization from 1925 to 1935; its tactical response to the communal friction of the Shuddhi movement and the regional political dynamics of North India; and its conditional alliance with the All India Muslim League, culminating in the historic 1946 Banaras Conference. By examining primary sources, including the Khutbat-e-All India Sunni Conference (1946) and contemporary vernacular press, this study presents a major revision to existing scholarship: the AISC was not realistically aimed at establishing an independent, ideal theological state. Rather, its core aspiration was to act as a survivalist counterpoise to the prevailing sociopolitical currents of North India. On one side, aggressive Hindu reformist organizations threatened the Sunni mainstream in rural areas; on the other, the pro-Congress, nationalist stance of Deobandi ulema systematically undermined the political worth of the Barelvi school. Thus, the AISC's project was essentially a defensive, regional counter-strategy. When the landmark provincial elections of 1945–1946 shifted the center of gravity to the Muslim-majority provinces, the real politics of the subcontinent took a completely different trajectory. The AISC's leadership realized that while their earlier purpose of forming a mature, consolidated representative body had met with temporary success, the post-election compromises of the Muslim League made their political position untenable. The alliance was ultimately a fiasco, leaving the Barelvi mainstream marginalized in the high-stakes statecraft of the new nation-state.

Keywords: All India Sunni Conference, Two-Nation Theory, Sunni Ulema, Barelvi Movement, Venkat Dhulipala, Shuddhi Movement, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan

Introduction: Re-centering the Sufi-Sunni Mainstream in Partition Historiography

The intellectual and political history of the Pakistan movement has long been characterized by a glaring historiographical omission (Qureshi, 1965). Standard accounts of Muslim mobilization in late colonial India tend to polarize the religious sphere into two distinct camps: the nationalist ulema, primarily associated with the Deoband-led Jamiat

Ulema-e-Hind, who vehemently opposed the partition of the subcontinent, and the modernist, secular elite of the All India Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who championed the demand for a separate homeland. When religious support for the Muslim League is acknowledged, it is often represented as either an instrumental manipulation of sacred symbols by secular elites or as a late-stage conversion of regional religious elites, particularly the landowners and pirs of Punjab and Sindh. This prevailing dichotomy significantly flattens the rich, intra-communal theological contestation that occurred in the crucial decades leading up to 1947 (Malik, 2008). In particular, it overlooks the structured, mass-based theological defense of the Two-Nation Theory articulated by the All India Sunni Conference (AISC) (Noori, 2007). Founded in 1925, the AISC emerged as the primary institutional voice of the Barelvi, or Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat, movement in British India (Sanyal, 1996). Far from being a passive bystander or a mere political tool of the League, the AISC formulated a sophisticated, highly organized, and popular theological rationale for the creation of Pakistan (Khutbat-e-All India Sunni Conference, 1946).

To understand the historical significance of this movement, it is necessary to situate it within the wider landscape of South Asian Islamic scholarship. The most influential recent monograph on the intellectual origins of Pakistan, Venkat Dhulipala's *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (2015), argues persuasively that Pakistan was widely imagined in the public sphere of the United Provinces (U.P.) as a sovereign Islamic state, a "New Medina." However, Dhulipala's (2015) evidentiary base is overwhelmingly Deobandi, focusing extensively on the debates of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, Ashraf Ali Thanwi, and Shabbir Ahmad Usmani. Reviewers have noted this Deobandi tilt as a serious limitation of his work. The Barelvi/Sufi mainstream—which represented the vast majority of the rural and urban Sunni population of North India—remains largely absent from Dhulipala's narrative. Conversely, Usha Sanyal's (1996) seminal work, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement, 1870–1920*, provides the standard scholarly account of the Barelvi movement. However, as its subtitle indicates, Sanyal's (1996) study ends in 1920—precisely where the AISC's active political life begins. Consequently, the source that historians lean on most for Barelvi history does not cover the crucial decades of the Pakistan movement. This paper fills these historiographical gaps by using primary sources—specifically the proceedings and presidential addresses (Khutbat) of the All India Sunni Conference (Khutbat-e-All India Sunni Conference, 1946; Muradabadi, 1925), contemporary newspaper accounts from *Dabdaba-e-Sikandari* (1946), and personal memoirs (Ashrafi al-Jilani, 2006)—to reconstruct the AISC's unique political theology.

This paper argues that the AISC's political stance was not a proactive, ideologically independent drive toward a theoretical Islamic state. Instead, it was a defensive regional counter-strategy designed to counter two concurrent, threatening trends in northern India: the aggressive anti-Muslim re-proselytization campaigns of Hindu reformist organizations (Sikand, 2005), and the pro-Congress, nationalist platform of the Deobandi ulema, which systematically marginalized the political value of Barelvi scholars. When the landmark elections of 1945–1946 shifted the locus of power to the Muslim-majority provinces, the real politics of the Pakistan movement pivoted to high-level secular compromises. The AISC was forced to realize that while their grassroots consolidation had achieved temporary prominence, their political aspirations were incompatible with the pragmatic,

landlord-dominated trajectory of the Muslim League, ending in political disillusionment and a structural fiasco (Noori, 2007).

Part 1: Internal Evolution and Institutionalization of the Sunni Mainstream (1925–1935)

The structural origins of the All India Sunni Conference lie in the efforts of Barelvi scholars to unify the highly decentralized and localized networks of South Asian Sufism into a cohesive, politically active public body. Historically, the Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat movement, founded by Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi (d. 1921), was decentralized, operating through various khanqahs (hospices), madrasas (seminaries), and mazars (shrines) across British India. Before the inception of the AISC, there were approximately twenty-three distinct regional bodies representing the localized interests of Sunni Muslims across various provinces of British India. Each faction functioned independently, addressing immediate concerns in its immediate environment. While some were highly active, their influence remained regionally limited and lacked an all-India appeal (Noori, 2007). Their activities were confined to their respective astanas, khanqahs, madrasas, and mazars, reflecting a scattered, politically dormant mainstream despite representing the numerical majority of Indian Muslims.

To coordinate these fragmented institutions, a historic gathering of Sunni ulema was convened at Jamia Naeemia in Moradabad between March 16 and 19, 1925 (Muradabadi, 1925). This meeting marked the formal establishment of Jamiyyat-e-Aliyah-al Markaziah, commonly known as the All India Sunni Conference (AISC) (Muradabadi, 1925). A persistent point of confusion in secondary literature and draft histories is the division of the founding leadership during this inaugural 1925 meeting. A closer reading of the primary records—specifically the published proceedings, All India Sunni Conference Moradabad (Muradabadi, 1925)—resolves this apparent contradiction: By distinguishing the permanent central organizational leadership (headed by Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah) from session-specific working presidents (such as Maulana Hamid Raza Khan, the eldest son of Ahmad Raza Khan), the organizational hierarchy of the 1925 conference becomes clear (Muradabadi, 1925). The inclusion of Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah of Alipur Sharif (Punjab) as the central President was a highly calculated strategic move (Noori, 2007). While the intellectual engine of the Barelvi movement was firmly rooted in the minority-province urban centers of the United Provinces, such as Bareilly, Badaun, and Moradabad (Sanyal, 1996), the mass base of Sufi devotees (murids) and influential shrines (gaddis) was situated in the Muslim-majority province of Punjab (Malik, 2008). Bringing Pir Jamaat Ali Shah into the leadership of the AISC bridged the urban-intellectual core of U.P. with the vast rural-devotional network of Punjab (Noori, 2007).

The first conference in Moradabad was attended by three hundred prominent ulema and mashaikh representing various Sufi orders, including Qadri, Chishti, Naqshbandi, and Suhrawardi (Muradabadi, 1925). The immediate goal of the AISC was to establish a clear definition of the "Sunni" identity to prevent political co-optation by rival groups (Muradabadi, 1925). With the rise of the nationalist press, various nationalist Muslim groups in the United Provinces, such as the U.P. Sunni Board at Lucknow, began using the label "Sunni" to recruit support for composite Indian nationalism (Zaman, 2002). To counter this, the AISC formally incorporated a strict definition of "Sunni" into its constitution and membership forms (Muradabadi, 1925). A true Sunni was defined not merely as a non-Shia Muslim, but specifically as an adherent who followed the four schools of jurisprudence, respected the Rightly Guided Caliphs, revered the Sufi masters, and recognized the authority of classic Sunni scholars such as Maulana Fazl-e-Haq

Khairabadi, Mufti Shah Fazal Rasool Badauni, and Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Bareilvi (Muradabadi, 1925). This institutionalization laid the groundwork for a disciplined, politically conscious religious block capable of resisting both Hindu nationalism and the pan-Islamic, anti-partition arguments of the Deoband-led Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Noori, 2007).

The Shuddhi Crisis, Regional Dynamics, and the Strategy of Counterpoise

The sudden political mobilization of the Bareilvi ulema in 1925 was not an abstract pursuit of a pure theological state. It was an urgent, defensive counterpoise to the intense communal anxieties that gripped northern India in the wake of the failed Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. The early 1920s saw the rapid rise of Hindu revivalist movements, most notably the Shuddhi (purification/conversion) and Sangathan (consolidation) campaigns spearheaded by the Arya Samaj (Sikand, 2005). These campaigns targeted "Nau-Muslim" (newly converted Muslim) communities, such as the Malkana Rajputs in the United Provinces and Central Provinces, who retained many of their pre-conversion cultural and social practices (Sikand, 2005). Arya Samaj strategists realized that targeting these communities on a mass, caste-wide basis in rural areas was far more effective than trying to convert individual urban Muslims (Sikand, 2005).

The nationalist ulema of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, bound by their political alliance with the Indian National Congress, were slow and soft-pedaled in their response to these revivalist campaigns. They feared that an aggressive counter-campaign would fracture the fragile Hindu-Muslim alliance against British rule. To the Bareilvi ulema, this political compromise was an existential threat to the Muslim community in India. It was also a direct blow to their own socio-religious standing. By aligning with Congress, the Deobandi nationalist ulema claimed the right to speak for the entire Muslim community, effectively erasing the political worth and public relevance of the Bareilvi school of thought (Noori, 2007). To trace the deeper socio-political deterioration, one must look at the post-Khilafat landscape. During the peak of the Khilafat agitation, Indian Muslim politics made several compromises regarding religious norms. When prominent nationalist ulema issued a proclamation declaring India to be Dar-ul-Harb (the Abode of War), a disastrous mass migration (Hijrat) to Afghanistan was triggered. Thousands of poor, rural Muslims sold their properties and livestock for negligible prices, only to encounter severe hardships at the Afghan border. Upon their return, they found themselves in absolute poverty, stripped of their livelihoods (Qureshi, 1965). Simultaneously, the non-cooperation movement (Tehrik-e-Tark-e-Muwalaat) urged Muslims to boycott government educational institutions, quit administrative jobs, and return state titles (Qureshi, 1965). This boycott resulted in widespread economic distress, leaving the lower-class Muslim populace severely vulnerable to the financial inducements of Hindu proselytizers (Sikand, 2005). In response, Bareilvi leaders like Maulana Nacemuddin Muradabadi and Maulana Mustafa Raza Khan mobilized their own resources (Noori, 2007). They deployed the Jama'at Raza-e-Mustafa to set up headquarters in the Shuddhi-affected regions, particularly around Agra (Sanyal, 1996). Bareilvi preachers and pirs traveled from village to village, counter-proselytizing, offering social and financial relief to indebted Muslim peasants, and re-instructing these communities in basic Islamic tenets (Sikand, 2005). According to Sikand (2005), this counter-mobilization was largely successful because it bypassed high-political discourse and worked through the existing local networks of pirs, who held immense spiritual authority over these vulnerable populations.

This defensive counter-strategy in the 1920s profoundly shaped the political theology of the AISC. It fostered a deep skepticism of composite Indian nationalism and convinced

Barelvi scholars that the Muslim minority in Hindu-majority provinces like the U.P. could never rely on a secular or Congress-led state to protect their religious identity (Noori, 2007). Crucially, the early territorial proposals for a separate Muslim homeland that emerged from Barelvi scholars—such as Maulana Abdul Qadir Badayuni's 1925 proposal for a physical partition of the subcontinent, were not driven by a grand plan for an ideal Islamic state. Instead, they were defensive, regional solutions to escape the immediate threat of Hindu domination in the north. For the Barelvi ulema of the U.P., partition was a practical way to preserve their community and protect their own political worth from being undermined by both Hindu revivalists and the pro-Congress Deobandi ulema (Noori, 2007).

The Banaras Conference (1946) and the Mirage of the "New Medina"

By the mid-1940s, the political atmosphere in British India had reached a critical turning point. The end of the Second World War and the arrival of the Cabinet Mission signaled that the British withdrawal was imminent. In this high-stakes environment, the All India Muslim League desperately needed to prove that it was the "sole spokesman" of the subcontinent's Muslims. However, in the minority provinces, the League was still struggling to counter the influence of the nationalist ulema (Jalal, 1985). Recognizing this, the leadership of the AISC decided to organize a massive public show of strength to consolidate Sunni support for Pakistan and send a clear message to the Muslim League regarding the theological character of the proposed state. This culminated in the historic Third All India Sunni Conference, held in Banaras (Varanasi) from April 27 to 30, 1946 (Sunni Conference, 1946).

The Banaras Conference was a watershed event in the history of the Pakistan movement. According to contemporary accounts in the newspaper *Dabdaba-e-Sikandari* (1946), the conference drew over 7,000 ulema and mashaikh from all across India and attracted a public attendance of over 200,000 Muslims. It was the largest single religious gathering in support of the Pakistan demand prior to Partition (Noori, 2007). The conference was presided over by Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah, with Maulana Naeemuddin Muradabadi acting as the chief organizer (Sunni Conference, 1946). Crucially, the presidential address was delivered by the prominent Sufi scholar Syed Muhammad Ashrafi al-Jilani, known as Muhaddith-e-Azam Hind. In this landmark address, Muhaddith-e-Azam Hind explicitly articulated the conditional nature of Barelvi support for the Muslim League. He began by diagnosing the lack of political and constitutional literacy among the Sunni masses:

"There are many versions of the concept of Pakistan floating around in the political atmosphere. However, let me tell you one thing clearly: our Sunni followers have no clear idea what this Pakistan business is all about. What does it actually mean? How will it be implemented, and where will it be implemented? These Sunnis are not aware of the constitutional debates going around in the country, nor do they have any idea of what type of debates the newspapers are generating after the Pakistan question. They have only one clear conception about the political agenda presented by the Muslim League for the sake of the creation of Pakistan: namely, that the League wants to establish an Islamic government. That is why Sunni Muslims are favoring the Muslim League in its campaign. (Kachochhwi, 1946)

This statement reveals how the AISC "manufactured consent" for the Pakistan movement (Noori, 2007). The Sunni masses were not mobilizing for Jinnah's Western-style constitutional ideals or the economic interests of the Muslim landed elite. They were mobilizing because their trusted religious authorities—the pirs and ulema—had translated the secular-modernist language of the Muslim League into a sacred, millenarian vision of

an Islamic state (Kachochhwi, 1946). Muhaddith-e-Azam Hind went on to detail this vision, contrasting the permanent, theological mission of the AISC with the temporary, political mission of the Muslim League:

"...Our ultimate desire is that the whole world should become Pakistan. However, since that is presently impossible, we seek only that feasible portion which can now be constituted as Pakistan. Our mission for Pakistan is permanent in its nature and purpose. The Muslim League has nothing to do with Khanqahs, Masjids, and Mazarat, while our mission is deeply imbibed in the interlinking of all these manifestations of Sufism. In that way, we intend to build an Islamic state with a permanent impression. In this perspective, our policy is to lend favor to the Muslim League where it is familiar with our purpose. On the other hand, differing positions would entail the parting of the ways if our version of Pakistan scheme does not materialize". While this address framed their support as conditional and their goal as a revival of the Khilafat-e-Rashida (the Rightly Guided Caliphate), this grand rhetoric masked the practical limits of their strategy. The AISC was not in a position to enforce these conditions. By tying their political fortune entirely to the Muslim League, the Barelvi ulema had played their only card (Noori, 2007).

The Pivot of 1945–1946: Landslide Elections, High Politics, and the Realist Fiasco

While the AISC was mobilizing the Sunni masses of the United Provinces around this purist, theological vision of Pakistan (Sunni Conference, 1946), the structural dynamics of late colonial Indian politics were shifting rapidly. The provincial elections of 1945–1946 were a landslide victory for the All India Muslim League, which won almost all of the Muslim-reserved seats across the country. However, this victory brought about a fundamental shift in the power dynamics of the Pakistan movement (Jalal, 1985). Prior to 1945, the ideological and intellectual engine of the movement was concentrated in the minority provinces like the U.P., where the existential fear of Hindu majority rule drove a highly ideological, theological discourse (Dhulipala, 2015).

But once the elections were won, the "high politics" of the Muslim League shifted to the Muslim-majority provinces, particularly the Punjab. In these majority provinces, the dynamics of mobilization were very different (Jalal, 1985). The League's success in Punjab did not rely on the purist, Sharia-driven theological visions of the U.P. ulema (Dhulipala, 2015). Instead, it depended on the pragmatic alignment of landowning elites, unionist politicians who crossed over to the League at the last minute, and regional pirs whose primary interest was maintaining their localized spiritual and economic influence under a friendly government. By mid-1945, as the prospect of Pakistan became a concrete political reality, the U.P.-based Barelvi ulema of the AISC began to observe this shift with deep concern. They realized that the "high politics" of the Muslim League—conducted in English by Jinnah and his secular associates—was increasingly marginalizing the theological promises made on the vernacular stage (Noori, 2007). The AISC leaders watched as the League made pragmatic compromises with secular, leftist, and non-devout politicians to secure its hold on the majority provinces (Jalal, 1985). This was particularly evident in Punjab, where the landlord-dominated leadership of the League showed no interest in implementing a revolutionary, Sharia-based social or legal order.

This realization prompted a shift in the AISC's posture in the final months before Partition. While they continued to support the demand for a separate homeland to escape Hindu domination, their rhetoric became increasingly defensive. They realized that the state being built was not the "New Medina" they had envisioned, but a modern nation-state dominated by a secularized, British-trained bureaucracy and military elite. The AISC's earlier stance, forged as a defensive counter-strategy to survive the peculiar anti-Muslim

currents of the north, began to clash with the reality of a Pakistan dominated by the pragmatism of the majority provinces. The ulema realized that "something unwanted had happened": the popular religious euphoria they had generated to protect their own political worth had been captured by a modernist state apparatus that had no intention of yielding authority to Bareilvi scholars (Noori, 2007). Instead of gaining a position of power, the AISC watched as the League elevated Deobandi scholars who had broken away from Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind—such as Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani of the newly formed Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI)—to prominent roles, including appointing Usmani to the Constituent Assembly. The Bareilvi ulema, despite their massive grassroots support, received no official recognition or power from the League's leadership. The entire mobilization strategy had ended in a political fiasco, leaving them marginalized in the very state they had helped create (Noori, 2007).

Conclusion: The Aftermath of Partition and the Metamorphosis of the AISC

The political trajectory of the All India Sunni Conference highlights the complex, highly contested, and ultimately tragic relationship between religious mobilization and state-building in the making of Pakistan (Noori, 2007). Far from being a monolithic, straightforward endorsement of the Muslim League, Bareilvi participation in the Pakistan movement was a defensive regional counter-strategy. It was designed to counter the threats of Hindu revivalism and Deobandi nationalist dominance in the minority provinces of the north (Noori, 2007). The AISC successfully bridged the intellectual core of the minority-province ulema with the mass devotional networks of the majority-province pirs (Noori, 2007), providing the League with the popular religious legitimacy it needed to claim "sole spokesman" status. However, the structural shift of 1945–1946 sidelined this theological vision. Once the state of Pakistan was created in August 1947, the secular-modernist elite of the League, backed by the bureaucracy and military, consolidated their control over the state apparatus. The AISC's regional, defensive project ended in a fiasco as they were politically marginalized and bypassed in favor of other religious factions (Noori, 2007).

Recognizing that their original purpose of regional counterpoise was now obsolete, the leadership of the AISC met in Multan on March 28, 1948, to dismantle the conference and reorganize their political forces. From the ashes of the AISC, they founded a new political party: the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP). The JUP inherited the AISC's theological commitments, its reliance on Sufi shrine networks, and its deep skepticism of the secularized state elite (Malik, 2008). Throughout the post-partition era, the JUP would serve as the primary institutional vehicle for Bareilvi political activism in Pakistan, leading campaigns for the implementation of Islamic law (Noori, 2007). The metamorphosis of the AISC into the JUP represents the enduring legacy of this late colonial movement—a legacy characterized by a persistent, unresolved tension between the secular state elite and the Sufi-Sunni mainstream over the very definition and control of Pakistan.

Note:

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