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Political Consciousness and Leadership: Muslim Women in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements

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Abstract

This research paper examines the emergence of political consciousness and leadership among Muslim women during the Khilafat (1919–1924) and Non-Cooperation (1920–1922) Movements—two of the most significant mass mobilizations in India’s anti-colonial struggle. Traditionally confined to domestic and purdah-bound spaces, Muslim women entered the political arena during this period with unprecedented visibility and agency. Drawing on historical records, speeches, memoirs, and contemporary writings, the study analyzes how religious solidarity, nationalist appeals, and Gandhian mass politics created new opportunities for women’s participation. It highlights the contributions of key figures such as Bi Amman (Abadi Bano Begum), Amjadi Bano Begum, and others who mobilized communities, addressed public gatherings, raised funds, and symbolized resistance against colonial rule.

The research paper also explores the ways in which Muslim women negotiated cultural norms, purdah restrictions, and patriarchal expectations to assert political identities. Their involvement in boycott campaigns, swadeshi activities, picketing, and nationalist outreach reflects a shift from private roles to public activism. The study further examines the barriers they faced—including conservative opposition, colonial surveillance, and social risks—and assesses the long-term impact of their political awakening on subsequent women’s movements and Muslim women’s socio-political status in India. This research underscores that Muslim women were not passive participants but active political agents whose leadership strengthened communal unity and enriched India’s freedom struggle.

Keywords: Muslim Women; Khilafat Movement; Non-Cooperation Movement; Political Consciousness; Leadership; Gender and Nationalism; Anti-Colonial Struggle; Purdah; Social Reform; Indian Freedom Movement.

Introduction

The early decades of the twentieth century marked a transformative phase in India’s anti-colonial struggle, as political resistance expanded from elite leadership to mass-based participation. The aftermath of the Partition of Bengal (1905), the First World War, and repressive British policies created deep social and political anxieties across communities. According to Sarkar (1983), this period “witnessed an unprecedented politicization of ordinary men and women, breaking traditional boundaries of caste, class, and religion”.¹ It is within this turbulent yet dynamic landscape that the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements emerged as watershed moments of collective resistance. Gandhi’s leadership played a pivotal role in transforming nationalist politics into a broad, participatory, and morally charged mass movement. By advocating non-violence, swadeshi, and satyagraha, Gandhi created forms of



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political action accessible to women, peasants, artisans, and marginalized communities. Judith Brown notes that Gandhi's approach "opened political spaces that had previously been restricted to educated male elites".ⁱⁱ His support for the Khilafat cause further united Hindu and Muslim communities under a shared moral and political agenda.

The role of Muslim communities during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements was particularly significant. The Ottoman Caliphate's dismemberment stirred deep emotional and religious concerns among Indian Muslims, transforming the Khilafat agitation into a powerful anti-colonial campaign. As Minault (1982) argues, "the Khilafat Movement drew Indian Muslims into nationalist politics in unprecedented numbers, reshaping their political identity".ⁱⁱⁱ This mobilization, combined with Gandhi's call for non-cooperation, created a fertile space for political awakening across genders. Within this context, Muslim women entered the public sphere with remarkable visibility. Despite purdah norms and conservative restrictions, many women actively participated in political meetings, fundraising campaigns, boycotts, and public demonstrations. Bi Amman and other Muslim women leaders challenged gendered boundaries by delivering speeches, mobilizing households, and symbolizing moral resistance. Gail Minault notes that "the Khilafat period became a turning point when Muslim women asserted moral leadership and political agency".^{iv}

Thus, the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements not only shaped India's nationalist politics but also opened transformative new spaces for Muslim women's political participation and leadership.

Historical Context

The political landscape of India between 1900 and the early 1920s was marked by deepening colonial exploitation, rising nationalist sentiments, and widespread social unrest. The repression following the Swadeshi movement, the impact of World War I, and exploitative revenue policies intensified public discontent. As Sumit Sarkar notes, "the early twentieth century saw the sharpening of anti-colonial consciousness as diverse groups felt the heavy impact of imperial rule".^v This period created fertile ground for mass mobilizations like the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. The Ottoman collapse after World War I had profound consequences for global Muslim sentiments. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the threat to the Caliphate, a symbol of religious unity, sparked widespread anger among Muslims across Asia and Africa. In India, where the Caliph was regarded as a spiritual guide, Muslim leaders and communities saw the British policies as a direct affront to Islamic identity. As Gail Minault explains, "the Caliphate question resonated deeply with Indian Muslims, linking global Muslim solidarity with anti-colonial nationalism".^{vi}

British policies—such as wartime recruitment, heavy taxation, and repressive measures like the Rowlatt Act—further alienated Indian Muslims. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre intensified distrust. Many Muslim leaders concluded that cooperation with colonial rule was no longer viable. Robinson argues that "the Khilafat agitation became the moral and political expression of accumulated Muslim grievances against imperial authority".^{vii} Simultaneously, the rise of Indian nationalism and Gandhian mass politics redefined the political landscape. Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence, swadeshi, and mass participation brought together Hindus, Muslims,



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women, and marginalized communities into a unified struggle. Judith Brown notes that “Gandhi’s strategy transformed nationalism into a popular movement drawing strength from moral persuasion and grassroots mobilization”.^{viii}

Before the Khilafat Movement, Muslim women’s status in society was shaped by conservative norms, limited public engagement, and strict purdah practices. Education was restricted to a small elite. Yet reform movements and Urdu women’s journals began encouraging women’s literacy and social awareness. Minault observes that “even within seclusion, Muslim women cultivated political awareness through reformist literature and domestic discussions”.^{ix} Thus, when the Khilafat call emerged, Muslim women were prepared to participate, marking a historic shift from seclusion to public political activism.

The Khilafat Movement and Muslim Women’s Participation

The Khilafat Movement (1919–1924) emerged as a powerful expression of anti-colonial sentiment, led primarily by the Ali brothers—Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali—and supported by prominent Muslim scholars, ulema, and nationalist leaders. The movement sought to protect the Ottoman Caliphate after its dismemberment by the Allied powers, symbolizing both religious solidarity and anti-imperialist struggle. According to Minault (1982), “the Khilafat agitation fused global Muslim concerns with Indian nationalist aspirations, drawing unparalleled mass participation”.^x Its goals—to pressure the British government to preserve the Caliphate and to mobilize Indian Muslims for national unity—created a unique political environment that invited women into public life. Women’s mobilization began through religious networks, meetings conducted by ulema, and encouragement from nationalist leaders. The ulema, traditionally conservative in gender matters, surprisingly endorsed women’s participation, arguing that the defense of Islam required collective effort. Community leaders encouraged domestic gatherings where women discussed the Caliphate, stitched khadi, and raised funds. As Robinson notes, “the Khilafat cause legitimated women’s involvement by embedding political activism within religious duty”.^{xi}

Bi Amman (Abadi Bano Begum) emerged as the most iconic Muslim woman leader of the Khilafat era. The mother of the Ali brothers, she addressed large gatherings from behind purdah, urging Muslim men and women to resist British oppression. She famously declared that if men were jailed, “women would continue the struggle.” As Minault writes, “Bi Amman’s speeches symbolized the moral authority of Muslim motherhood transformed into political leadership”.^{xii} Her public engagements broke long-established boundaries of purdah without abandoning its cultural meaning. Amjadi Bano Begum, wife of Mohammad Ali, played an instrumental role in touring Muslim-majority regions, raising funds, and urging women to boycott foreign goods. She organized women’s processions, addressing them from purdah-enclosed platforms. Her activism revealed that political leadership could coexist with religious identity. As Hasan notes, “Amjadi Bano represented a new Muslim womanhood—rooted in purdah yet politically assertive”.^{xiii}

Interestingly, the Khilafat Movement also saw inter-community solidarity, exemplified by women like Basanti Devi, a Hindu leader who collaborated with Muslim women. She participated in joint marches, inspired Muslim housewives to join the non-cooperation campaign,



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and symbolized Hindu–Muslim–women alliances. According to Forbes, “the presence of Hindu women leaders amplified the inclusive nature of Khilafat mobilization”.^{xiv}

Muslim women’s activities included speeches, fundraising, organizing domestic committees, picketing shops selling foreign cloth, and mobilizing other women. They collected gold ornaments, clothing, and household items for the movement. Many made emotional appeals, linking political struggle to Islamic values such as justice and sacrifice. Their public visibility, despite purdah, challenged patriarchal norms by demonstrating that female participation did not undermine religious respectability. One of the most striking developments was the use of purdah spaces as political spaces. Women held meetings inside zenanas, turning private arenas into centers of political discussion. As Minault argues, “the zenana became the first training ground for Muslim women’s political activism”.^{xv} Religious-nationalist idioms—such as references to the Prophet’s struggle, Islamic unity, and moral duty—played a key role in framing activism as legitimate and sacred. Thus, the Khilafat Movement marked a turning point by providing Muslim women with ideological justification, organizational support, and community acceptance for political engagement, laying the foundation for broader participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Muslim Women in the Non-Cooperation Movement

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), launched under Gandhi’s leadership, expanded the political horizons that the Khilafat agitation had opened for Muslim women. Gandhi’s call for non-violence, swadeshi, and boycott of British institutions provided a new moral and political framework that appealed deeply to Muslim women already mobilized by the Khilafat cause. According to Judith Brown, “Gandhi’s invitation to women transformed the national movement from a male-led campaign into a socially diverse mass struggle”.^{xvi}

For Muslim women, participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement represented a shift from religious protest to nationalist activism. Their roles broadened beyond defending the Caliphate to promoting Indian self-rule. Many women who had entered public life during Khilafat seamlessly transitioned into Non-Cooperation activities, further integrating with Hindu and Christian women activists. As Sarkar explains, “the merging of Khilafat and Non-Cooperation created a unified terrain of mass politics where Muslim women’s participation became both natural and necessary”.^{xvii}

Muslim women were active in several key Gandhian activities:

Boycott of Foreign Cloth: Women organized public burnings of foreign cloth, inspected markets, and persuaded other women to adopt swadeshi. Their presence symbolized moral authority and community responsibility. According to Forbes, “women’s role in the boycott added cultural legitimacy to the economic dimension of the movement”.^{xviii}

Picketeering and Public Demonstrations: Muslim women picketed liquor shops, foreign cloth stores, and government offices. Women’s picketing, often performed in groups, challenged colonial authority and patriarchal restrictions simultaneously. Basanti Devi and her Muslim counterparts jointly led several marches in Bengal, showcasing interfaith unity.

Swadeshi Promotion and Khadi Production: Women spun and distributed khadi, set up small production units in homes, and encouraged other women to boycott British-made



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goods. Khadi became a symbol of collective resistance, and Muslim women's participation highlighted swadeshi's cross-religious appeal.

Participation in Volunteer Corps and Committees: In many regions, Muslim women formed volunteer corps to mobilize neighbourhoods, assist in organizing meetings, and provide logistical support during marches. According to Minault, "these committees became training grounds for women's emerging leadership and organizational skills".^{xix}

The Non-Cooperation Movement also strengthened Hindu-Muslim unity through women's collaboration. Joint rallies, joint spinning groups, and shared picketing campaigns illustrated a gendered solidarity transcending communal divides. This inter-community cooperation challenged both colonial propaganda and conservative social divisions. Muslim women also continued to negotiate purdah norms creatively. Many participated from behind veils or spoke from enclosed platforms, maintaining religious respectability while asserting political agency. Their activism encouraged younger women to pursue education, engage in public discussions, and question conservative restrictions. However, women also faced risks—colonial surveillance, arrests, threats from local conservatives, and social ostracism. Yet these risks heightened their political consciousness. As Hasan (1994) writes, "participation in Gandhian mass politics transformed Muslim women into political subjects aware of their rights, responsibilities, and collective power".^{xx}

Political Consciousness Among Muslim Women

The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements generated an unprecedented political consciousness among Muslim women, allowing them to develop new forms of agency within the anti-colonial struggle. Until the early twentieth century, Muslim women's political identity was largely shaped by domestic roles, purdah restrictions, and limited public visibility. However, the mobilization campaigns of the 1919–1922 period transformed these traditional boundaries. As Minault (1998) argues, "the Khilafat era marked a moment when Muslim women began to self-identify as political actors capable of influencing public life".^{xxi} Their engagement signified not merely participation but the conscious shaping of a political identity informed by religious, cultural, and nationalist narratives. The transition from domestic roles to public activism was gradual yet transformative. Women who had previously confined political discussions to the zenana began participating in public meetings, demonstrations, and fundraising drives. This shift was enabled by a shared sense of Islamic duty during the Khilafat agitation as well as Gandhian appeals for non-cooperation. According to Hasan (1994), "women stepped beyond domesticity not by abandoning purdah but by politicizing it, using religious respectability to legitimize public engagement".^{xxii}

Education and reform movements played a crucial role in deepening women's political awareness. The Aligarh reform movement, women's literacy campaigns, and Urdu education programs had already begun broadening intellectual horizons. Reformers such as Shaikh Abdullah and Urdu women's journals like *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan* cultivated debates on women's rights, social reform, and Islamic modernization. As Minault (1982) illustrates, "Muslim women absorbed political ideas both through formal education and through the reformist print culture circulating within households".^{xxiii}



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Urdu newspapers, pamphlets, and journals played a decisive role in shaping Muslim women's political consciousness. These publications reported speeches, printed fundraising appeals, and highlighted women's contributions, encouraging further participation. Newspapers such as *Zamindar*, *Hamdard*, and *Al-Hilal* frequently featured articles written for or about women. Robinson notes that "Urdu print culture served as the ideological bridge connecting Muslim women to global Muslim solidarity and Indian nationalism".^{xxiv} Internal debates within Muslim communities regarding women's roles created dynamic spaces for negotiation. While conservative groups cautioned against public exposure, many reformist clerics argued that protecting Islam justified women's participation. The result was a nuanced process of negotiating *purdah*, religion, and activism. As Forbes (1996) observes, "women turned *purdah* into a political resource, asserting agency while maintaining cultural legitimacy".^{xxv} Through these negotiations, Muslim women forged a new political identity embedded in faith, dignity, and national commitment.

Forms of Leadership and Organizational Roles

Muslim women displayed diverse forms of leadership during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements, ranging from symbolic to grassroots mobilization. Both elite and mass leaders played crucial roles in shaping the direction and scale of women's political participation. Elite leaders—such as Bi Amman, Amjadi Bano Begum, and Sarojini Naidu (though not Muslim, working collaboratively)—offered public speeches, moral guidance, and strategic direction. Their social status and literacy allowed them to influence larger audiences. According to Minault (1998), "elite women leaders symbolized the moral integrity of the nationalist struggle, lending cultural legitimacy to mass mobilization".^{xxvi} Mass leaders emerged from middle- and lower-class households, often organizing local meetings, door-to-door campaigns, and women's committees. Their activism was rooted in community networks rather than formal leadership structures. Hasan (1994) notes, "mass women activists provided the everyday labor of the movement—mobilizing neighbours, distributing pamphlets, and sustaining local momentum".^{xxvii}

Leadership styles varied widely. Some women exercised moral leadership, influencing actions through religious appeals, sacrifice, and self-discipline. Others exhibited symbolic leadership, representing courage and defiance from behind *purdah*-covered palanquins or enclosed platforms. Grassroots activists, meanwhile, represented organizational leadership, managing committees, coordinating boycotts, and mobilizing local support. Women's roles in local committees expanded significantly. They contributed to relief work, distributing food, stitching *khadi*, supporting families of jailed activists, and organizing community kitchens. Forbes writes that "local women's committees became the backbone of neighborhood-level mobilization during Non-Cooperation".^{xxviii}

Fundraising was another important dimension of women's leadership. Muslim women donated jewelry, sold household goods, and organized community collections. Public fundraising events became symbolic acts of defiance. As Minault (1982) emphasizes, "the sight of veiled women offering gold bangles and wedding ornaments electrified public gatherings and galvanized mass support".^{xxix} Women's public speeches represented one of the most radical forms of political defiance. Speaking from behind veils or curtains, leaders like Bi Amman



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addressed thousands, urging unity and sacrifice. Their oratory challenged colonial stereotypes of passive Muslim womanhood. Brown states, “women’s public voices redefined the political soundscape of the movement, introducing a gendered moral authority”.^{xxx} Thus, Muslim women’s leadership was multi-layered—symbolic, moral, organizational, and strategic—reflecting the depth of their political engagement.

Barriers, Risks, and Social Constraints

Despite their growing participation, Muslim women faced significant barriers and risks shaped by patriarchal norms, religious conservatism, and colonial repression. The most immediate constraint was the system of purdah, which restricted mobility, speech, and interaction with non-family males. While many women creatively adapted purdah for political participation, these adaptations were not universally accepted. As Minault (1998) notes, “women operated within a narrow space of negotiation, balancing activism with expectations of modesty and seclusion”.^{xxx} Resistance from conservative sections of society also posed obstacles. Some religious leaders questioned the propriety of women attending public meetings or addressing mixed audiences. Families feared social stigma or loss of honour if women appeared in political gatherings. Hasan observes that “women activists often confronted familial anxiety and community backlash, even when their activism was framed as religious duty”.^{xxxii} Colonial surveillance and repression further complicated women’s activism. British officials monitored women’s gatherings, banned speeches, confiscated pamphlets, and arrested women involved in picketing. According to Sarkar (1983), “the colonial state regarded women’s mobilization as doubly threatening—challenging both imperial authority and gender norms”.^{xxxiii}

Women also faced personal risks, including possible arrest, public humiliation, and social boycott. Participation in marches exposed them to physical threats and harassment. For lower-class Muslim women, economic dependence on male family members created additional constraints, as activism could result in loss of financial support. Forbes notes that “the fear of retaliation—both domestic and public—discouraged many potential women activists”.^{xxxiv} Communal tensions, especially during the late stages of the Khilafat Movement, complicated women’s participation. The breakdown of Hindu–Muslim unity in later years created mistrust and insecurity in mixed gatherings. Leaders struggled to maintain cohesion in face of political fragmentation. Despite these barriers, Muslim women persisted, carving political spaces through negotiation, courage, and community support. Their activism—shaped by religious conviction and nationalist commitment—challenged colonial power and patriarchal control simultaneously.

Impact and Legacy

The participation of Muslim women in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements left a profound and multi-layered impact on India’s political and social landscape. In the immediate political context, their involvement broadened the scope of both movements, demonstrating that anti-colonial resistance was not limited to male political elites. Women’s speeches, fundraising campaigns, and visible presence in processions infused the movements with a moral force that challenged both British authority and gendered assumptions about political agency. Their defiance of purdah restrictions—whether by speaking from behind veils or leading community mobilization—symbolically asserted that the nationalist struggle belonged to



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all segments of society. This visibility strengthened public support for both campaigns and contributed to their transformation into mass movements.

In the long-term socio-political context, Muslim women's activism during 1919–1922 catalyzed a transformation in their political identity. Many women who had been confined to domestic responsibilities now perceived themselves as rightful participants in public life. Their experiences in political meetings, organizational committees, and relief work nurtured a sense of agency and confidence that extended beyond the life of the movements. The period marked the emergence of a politically awakened generation of Muslim women who began advocating for education, civic rights, and social reforms within their communities. These developments planted the seeds for future activism in the 1930s and 1940s, when Muslim women increasingly joined the Indian National Congress, the All-India Women's Conference, and student-led political movements. Notable female leaders—such as Aziza Khalid, Sharifa Hamid Ali, and other regional activists—drew inspiration from Khilafat-era participation. Their activism contributed to discussions on women's rights, political representation, and social reform in the lead-up to independence.

Muslim women's engagement also enriched the broader freedom struggle, highlighting how anti-colonial nationalism intersected with gender and community identity. Their presence alongside Hindu, Sikh, and Christian women showcased the plural and inclusive character of India's nationalist movements, even when communal tensions later strained these alliances. Finally, the legacy of their political awakening significantly shaped post-independence Muslim women's movements and rights discourse. Activists and reformers traced their lineage to the Khilafat generation, emphasizing the historical precedent of Muslim women's leadership. Debates on personal law reform, education, and gender justice invoked the memory of early twentieth-century activism as evidence of a long-standing tradition of agency within the community. Thus, the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements stand not only as political milestones but also as transformative moments in the evolution of Muslim women's socio-political identity in India.

Conclusion

The participation of Muslim women in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements represents a crucial yet often overlooked chapter in India's anti-colonial struggle. Their involvement marked a significant transformation in gender roles, political agency, and the socio-cultural boundaries that had long confined them to domestic and purdah-restricted spaces. The movements provided Muslim women with unprecedented opportunities to step into the public sphere, engage in political discourse, and assert their identities as active contributors to national resistance. Whether through fundraising, mobilizing neighbourhood networks, delivering speeches from behind veils, or participating in boycott campaigns, these women redefined the contours of political participation in early twentieth-century India. The emergence of Muslim women as political actors was not merely a response to the immediate crisis of the Caliphate or Gandhian calls for non-cooperation; it reflected deeper socio-cultural shifts influenced by reform movements, expanding literacy, and the growth of Urdu print culture. Their activism demonstrated that religious identity and political engagement were not mutually exclusive but



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could intersect to create new forms of leadership rooted in moral authority, community solidarity, and nationalist aspirations. Through their participation, they challenged colonial stereotypes of passive womanhood and internal community notions that limited women's autonomy.

The long-term legacy of their involvement continued well beyond the 1920s. It paved the way for greater Muslim women's activism in subsequent decades—within nationalist politics, women's organizations, reform movements, and post-independence rights campaigns. Their courage and leadership established a historical foundation on which later generations-built struggles for education, legal rights, and socio-political representation. In this sense, the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation periods stand as transformative moments that awakened political consciousness among Muslim women and demonstrated their indispensable role in shaping India's freedom movement. Their contributions remain a powerful reminder that the struggle for independence was not solely a male endeavour, but a collective, gender-inclusive assertion of national identity and democratic aspiration.

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