The history of Indian Muslims — since the 1857-59 Uprising against British Rule, the first major anti-colonialist action in India, and up to the victorious outcome of the National Liberation Movement in 1947 — is characterised by a great variety of religious, philosophical, social and political trends. Politically, they embraced a religious-separatist movement which resulted in the formation of Pakistan, on the one hand, and a movement for unity of Hindus and Muslims in their struggle against British colonialism, on the other. During the concluding stage in the struggle for political independence, these two trends were personified by two political leaders: Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who led the Muslim League and the communal movement, and Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), an outstanding Muslim figure in the National Congress Party, who stood for the unity of Hindus and Muslims.

Revivalism was one of the leading trends in the religious-philosophical thinking of Indian Muslims, providing a framework for expression of ideas both by those who called for a return to medieval ways and who opposed the development of capitalist relations (the ideology of the Jamat-i-Islam Party), and by those who, like Abul Kalam Azad, sought to interpret Islamic precepts according to the requirements of the rising national movement.
The views of the ideological proponents of “Muslim nationalism,” Jinnah in particular, have been considered in works by Russian and foreign Indologists. As for Abul Kalam Azad, until now Russian scholars have portrayed him primarily as a political figure, and his philosophical and social views have not received proper scrutiny. This paper purports to dwell on precisely these aspects.

Abul Kalam Azad’s philosophical and socio-political views are inexorably linked with religion. This link was conditioned above all by the features characteristic of India’s historical and socio-economic evolution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another significant factor was Azad’s background as a member of an Ulema family and his education in the Muslim tradition. Like many of his compatriots, he held religious faith to be an indispensable part of the life of every individual and of the social organism as a whole.

Azad sought answers to general philosophical questions in religion, believing that neither science nor philosophy could provide them. And when he entered the arena of political struggle, he sought in religion guidance for dealing with concrete political problems of the day.

Dissatisfied with the traditional interpretation of the Koran, Azad looked for new ideas. This he did not by trying to modernise Islamic dogma, but through reviving what he considered the original teaching. Thus he wrote in 1913 that Muslims did not need to lay down a new foundation or exhibit their ingenuity. Instead, they should revive and reconfirm what the Koran prescribed. There is no need, he maintained, to build a new house; one has only to come back to the one that was abandoned. Therein lies the fundamental difference between Azad’s ideas as to what was to be done and the methods used by his contemporaries.1

First in his articles and letters, and later in his translation of the Koran into Urdu and his commentaries, Azad
presented his interpretation of Islam. According to him, the authors of previous commentaries “did not aim at representing what the Koran actually states.” Every commentator had some view to advance and he used the sacred text to lend support to this view. Moreover, the spirit of the Koran was distorted when its ideas were interpreted with the help of philosophical methods as well as by attempts to fit the Koran in the framework of Aristotelian logic. As a result, “the beauty and attraction of the Koranic method of argument and of demonstrating its truth was lost in a network of dialectical disquisitions. In fact, the truth had already been lost . . .” He disproved the idea that the “Koran should support and endorse every new discovery in scientific knowledge.”

Azad saw his mission in helping the faithful to interpret the holy scripture in the way it was understood at the time of Muhammad. He believed that “the first generation of people among whom the Koran was delivered was not a sophisticated race. Their mind was not cast in any artificial or conventional mould furnished by civilisation. It was content to receive a simple thought in its plain simplicity.” Thus, he explained the origin of the word “Allah” as a reflection of the ecstasy and admiration experienced before the Almighty Creator, expressed in the exclamation Illāh, indicating wonder and the humbleness of man.

He did not try to go into a logical explanation for the existence of God. He held that it was unnatural for man to doubt, or to reject, the existence of God because the “sense of God is inherent in human nature,” a sense that cannot be effected by man’s intellect or his environment. According to Azad, it is as natural for man to anthropomorphise divine attributes as to have an unshakable faith in God’s existence. Whenever man tries “to visualise a thing unseen or unfelt, he inevitably conjures up its qualities and feelings of which
he is aware in his own mundane life . . . whenever man attempted to carve out an image of God, he gave to Him his own shape.” Consequently, only the Koran shows the middle way between the transcendentalism of the Upaniṣads which leads, in the final analysis, to rejection of all divine attributes and of anthropomorphism.9

Though the Koran recognises individual divine attributes (God is living, all-powerful, creating, merciful, all-seeing, all-hearing, all-knowing, etc.), none of them is similar to human attributes: “And when there is none like unto Him, it follows that whatever attributes that might be assigned to Him cannot be assigned at the same time to any other.”10

Azad’s interpretation of divine attributes formed the basis of his ontological views. He considered four main divine attributes, which in the first Sūra of the Koran are determined as Rabbul-i-Alamin, Al-Rahman, Al-Rahim, and Malik-i-Yawmīddin. The first attribute was interpreted as divine providence, thanks to which the world follows the laws of expediency and harmony. The world was created so that “whatever is needed for the existence and sustenance of every being is provided at appropriate time and in appropriate quantity.”11 To illustrate his point, the commentator reminds us how water, drop by drop, reaches all the corners of the earth during definite seasons and in definite amounts. However, he chooses not to answer the question why divine providence deprives many of his compatriots of water while sending floods to others subjecting all to hunger as a result.

God’s mercy is expressed, according to Azad, in the harmony of his creation. Philosophy falls short of explaining its proportion and beauty. The Koran, on its part, explains that the divine attribute of mercy, as well as other attributes, seeks its earthly embodiment, and finds it, in making each and everything appearing in the world good and beautiful.12
This attribute also manifests itself as “. . . the law of gradualness or of steady movement,” according to which violence should not be employed immediately against something which disrupts harmony and is evil.\textsuperscript{13}

Azad also considers the social aspect of mercy and maintains that the Koran does not isolate the notion of mercy from that of justice: “The Koran . . . regards justice as mercy itself. It states that one cannot display in his life the sense of humanity, unless at the same time one sets one’s face against every form of cruelty.”\textsuperscript{14} It is divine justice that preserves order in the world and ensures the ultimate triumph of good at all times.

Azad’s emphasis that the Koran regards justice and punishment not as whims of God, but as an outcome of individuals’ actions, is noteworthy. The struggle for justice lies, in Azad’s view, at the core of one of the chief precepts of Islam — jihād. All work and hardship for the sake of justice, all pain and suffering, spiritual and physical, endured on this sacred path, all struggle, each instance of the giving up of life or property, and all service in word or pen for the sake of truth and justice — all this is jihād, he maintained.\textsuperscript{15}

Azad allowed for the use of violence in this struggle. An active participant in Gandhi’s non-cooperation campaigns and non-violent resistance, Azad, nevertheless, thought it necessary to stress the difference between Mahatma Gandhi’s views and his own. The observance of non-violence was in the nature of a religious precept for Gandhi; it was only a matter of political tactic for Azad. “Unlike Mahatma Gandhi my belief is not that armed force should never be opposed by armed force,” Azad stated at a court hearing in 1921. “It is my belief that such opposing of violence with violence is fully in harmony with the natural laws of God in those circumstances under which Islam permits the use of such violence. . . .”\textsuperscript{16}
The sociological inferences arising from Azad’s interpretation of divine attributes are rather contradictory. On the one hand, by accepting the expediency and harmony of the universe, which are seen as an expression of divine providence and mercy, man is reduced to a passive existence in this beautiful and harmonious universe, and consequently any action by man to reorganise this world becomes senseless and irrelevant. But, on the other hand, by conceding divine justice to reward or punish the actions of man, Azad holds man responsible for his actions.

Azad recognised God as the guiding force in the process of cognition. Divine guidance (hidâyát) manifests itself in the ability of human beings to have instinctive, sensitive and rational knowledge. But even the highest form of knowledge is imperfect, since, according to Azad, “what is beyond our senses, reason can scarcely comprehend. . . . Even in the sphere of mundane activity, which may be regarded as its field of operation, reason or intellect cannot always give us an effective lead.”17 But there is a force, he maintains, that can correct the mistakes of the intellect and show men the right way, and this force is divine revelation (Al-Huda), or, in other words, religion.

To the extent to which a man possesses instincts, feelings and intellect, he also is given the universal guidance of divine revelation.18 This revelation, Azad held, was not a blessing confined to one individual, but was given to mankind in general, without any discrimination, through a number of prophets, whose teachings did not contradict each other, but aimed at uniting all peoples in their belief in the oneness of God.

Azad made a distinction between the spirit of religion and its outward expression. The Koran teaches, he maintained, that the specific features inherent in individual religions are not the distinctive features of the spirit (dîn),
but of the outward expression of religion, of the ways and methods of worship (shara and minhaj). These distinctions are natural as they are determined by the different social conditions and times. “Every religion,” he admitted, “has had to evolve its own ritual as demanded by its environment. The thing that matters is devotion to God and righteous living.”

Azad saw the main objective of religion to lie in bringing people together.

The message which every Prophet delivered was that mankind were in reality one people and one community, and that there was but one God for all of them, and that on that account they should serve Him together and live as members of but one family.

The notion of one God for adherents of all religions and the ensuing notion of the unity of humankind worshipping one Supreme Lord was the nucleus of Azad’s religious-philosophical system. This conception determined his political position vis-à-vis the Indian National Liberation Movement.

Beginning around 1911, he emerged as a champion of Muslim nationalism and an opponent of British colonial rule. His philosophical and socio-political views of that period were vastly covered by the two journals he published: Al-Hilal (from July 1913 to November 1914) and Al-Bilagh (from November 1915 to April 1916).

He resolved to publish a journal to promote the formation of Indian Muslim public opinion after he had spent two years in Islamic countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Turkey (1907-09). The young Azad’s political views were shaped, to a considerable degree, under the influence of his acquaintance with Iraqi revolutionaries, leaders of the Young Turk movement, and followers of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. Though the need to change the attitude of Indian Muslims towards the colonial regime became apparent to him earlier, as a result of the 1905
Partition of Bengal and subsequent events, it turned into a firm political conviction after this tour. Azad saw the involvement of his compatriots and fellow Muslims in political activity and struggle against the British as the chief task of his weekly.

*Al-Hilal* challenged participants in the Aligarh Movement who, following Syed Ahmed Khan, advocated co-operation between the Muslim community and the British, seeing in it the way to greater prosperity for Indian Muslims. Azad’s resolute rejection of any collaboration with the colonialists was the first step towards breaking with the Aligarh school. It took him 10 years to prepare for the next and no less important step — renouncing the narrow religious nationalism that led to communalism and weakened the National Liberation movement. In the meantime, using *Al-Hilal* as his mouthpiece, he acted as a Muslim nationalist who insisted on unbreakable ties between politics and religion.

Of interest in this respect is Azad’s interview published in the 29 December 1912 issue of *Al-Hilal*. “You have suggested separation of politics from religion,” he said. “But if we do this what, then, is left with us? We have developed our political thinking from religion. . . . We believe that every thought which draws inspiration from any institution (including politics) other than the Koran is *kafr* (infidelity).”

At that time, Azad did not think that Hindus and Muslims should pool their efforts in the struggle against the colonial authorities; moreover, he actually called upon his fellow Muslims to pursue what can be described as political separatism. “Islam,” he insisted, “is such a perfect religion that its followers need not imitate Hindus in moulding their party. . . . The Muslims must not join any political party. They were the leaders of the world. If they submit to God, the whole universe will bend to their will.”
In opposing religious unity to national unity, he saw in each Muslim, first and foremost, a citizen of the world Muslim brotherhood. These ideas of Azad clearly bore an imprint of pan-Islamism, which was widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Azad was a more consistent proponent of the pan-Islamic theory put forth by Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani than any other Indian Muslim. Thus, unlike Muhammad Iqbal, who also came under the considerable influence of Afghani, but who did not deduce from the idea of pan-Islamism defence of the Khalifat, Azad believed that political loyalty to the Khalif, the rallying of all the world’s Muslims under him and complete subordination to him should become the main principles of a pan-Islamic society.

According to Azad, the subordination of the Muslim community to the Khalif should be political, not religious in nature, since religious guidance is the sole prerogative of God and His Prophet. To this he added a most important condition — political loyalty to the Khalif should be absolute only so far as he acts in strict observance of the precepts of the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet.24

What won Azad his popularity, however, were not his ideas of religious nationalism or even Islamic separatism, but the militant, anti-colonialist stance of his journals. It was not surprising, therefore, that Al-Hilal was closed down in 1915 and Al-Bilagh, which attempted to pursue the same line, had to stop publication in 1916. The publisher, Abul Kalam Azad, was banned from Calcutta under the Defence of India Regulations. The authorities in Punjab, Delhi, the United Provinces and Bombay also deprived him of the right to enter these cities and provinces, following which he was interned in Ranchi from autumn 1916 till the end of 1919.

These years of internal exile proved decisive for Azad, who undertook a serious review of his positions. The primary
The motivation for this was apparently the rapid progress made by the country’s National Liberation movement. But it was the backing given by the Indian National Congress to the Khilafat movement that opposed the predatory policies of the imperialist powers against the countries of the Ottoman empire which compelled Azad to give up extreme Muslim nationalism and to champion joint opposition to British colonialism by Muslims and Hindus. Following Mahatma Gandhi’s initiative, the Indian National Congress proclaimed its solidarity with the Khilafatists and launched a sweeping agitation campaign in defence of Turkey and other Islamic countries.

The evolution of Azad’s views from religious nationalism to secular nationalism was largely dictated by the developments in Turkey and countries of the Arabic Orient, such as the elimination of the institution of Khalifs by Ata Turk and the growth of Arab nationalism based on the common territory and linguistic, historical and cultural background of various Arab peoples.

Having become a member of the Congress Working Committee in 1920, Azad remained for the rest of his life one of the party’s most prominent leaders and a consistent champion of Muslim-Hindu co-operation. He was President of the Congress (1940-46), Minister of Education and then Minister of Natural Resources and Scientific Research (1947-58). Between 1951 and 1958, he was Deputy Leader of the Congress Party in parliament.

Encouraged by the progress of the liberation movement in India, Azad became convinced that success in the struggle for national independence depended on the unity of all Indians, irrespective of their religious or linguistic background. He justly maintained that the so-called community issue should and could be resolved only after the attainment of political independence.
He held that the division of the country on the basis of religious affiliation, far from resolving Hindu-Muslim contradictions, would only exacerbate them. The creation of two states opposed to each other would not solve the problems of the minorities in either of them, he believed. Further, instead of allaying religious-communal fears, Partition would consolidate them for ever, by creating two separate states on the basis of religious and communal animosity. In fact, Azad came to realise that the Hindu-Muslim conflict, as any communal strife, stemmed not from religious, but from socio-economic causes. He said that the real problems of the country were economic, not communal; the differences related to classes, not to communities. Once the country became free the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs would all see the true nature of the problems facing them and communal differences would be resolved.

He also foresaw the international consequences of the Partition and opposed it precisely because he did not want to see the integrity of the Indian state sacrificed for the sake of political independence.

If an angel were to descend from the high heavens and proclaim from the heights of the Qutub Minar, “Discard Hindu-Muslim unity and within twenty-four hours Swaraj is yours,” I will refuse the proffered Swaraj, but will not bulge an inch from my stand. The refusal of Swaraj will affect only India while the end of our unity will be the loss of the entire human world.26

Azad upheld the concept of a mixed nation against the demand for Partition and the underlying theory of two nations championed by the leaders of the Muslim League. In his younger years he had written and spoken emphatically for the isolation of the Muslim community and the advantages of Islam over other religions, in particular
Hinduism, calling upon his followers to take the special Muslim road. But after the 1920s, he consistently upheld the inseparability of the destinies of Hindus and Muslims and of their main social and political interests.

In his presidential address at the Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress in 1920, Azad stated:

Our language, our poetry, literature, society, our tastes, our dresses, our traditions and the innumerable realities of our daily life bear the zeal of a common life and a unified society . . . our social intercourse for over 1,000 years has blended into a united nationalism.27

It might be worthwhile to compare the above statement by Azad with that of Mohammed Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, who said that Muslims and Hindus are two different nations in the full meaning of the word. The Muslim nation is a nation of one hundred million and, more importantly, a nation with its own culture and civilisation, language and literature, art and architecture, names and place-names, values and laws and moral norms, as well as customs, calendar, history, traditions, affinities and ambitions, in a word, a nation with its own, special view of life.28

Those criticising Azad often accuse him of being contradictory.29 In fact, his philosophical and socio-political views in later life were very different from those he held in his youth. However, this contradictoriness is not evidence of his inconsistency, it only shows the logical evolution of Azad’s views in the course of the historical development of Indian society. Having once revised his former convictions, Azad firmly, even courageously, advocated his new views prompted by his experience of the struggle for liberation.

Azad based his conception of nationalism on the common territory, history and culture of the peoples of India. Nationalism, according to this rather ambiguous definition, is “a special state of belief in the collective life of
man,” one of the highest stages in the development of human relations and collective feelings. It is a higher stage, he claimed, than the awareness of family or kinship ties, than the feeling of community shared by the inhabitants of a village, town or district. Azad linked nationalism to a common country, a definite and common territorial and historical background.

It is important to point out the distinction that Azad made between different kinds of nationalism — the “aggressive” and “defensive” types, those of oppressing and oppressed nations respectively. Referring to the history of European nations, he stated that though “nationalism was born to defend the freedom and the rights of man, later on it became the greatest impediment to their achievement.”

According to Azad, Islam does not reject nationalism unless it is of the aggressive type, but it values it less than affiliation to one’s religion, a sentiment which unites peoples from different countries, to say nothing of the awareness of belonging to a world of human brotherhood. Although the ultimate goal of Islam consists in achieving this highest stage, only the one-before-last — or religious stage has been reached so far. What is referred to in this passage are the medieval Khilafats. It is noteworthy that the pan-Islamic movement drew inspiration from an essentially identical ideal.

During the last decade of his life, Azad often elaborated upon the idea of world citizenship, especially while addressing international gatherings. He held that the methods of teaching geography and history should be reviewed so as to “bring out the unity of the world . . . and the unity of man.” In his speech of welcome at the Second Session of the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, he said:
We must have new maps for children in the elementary stages in which the world will be painted in one colour; we must teach the child that he is a citizen of the world first and foremost, and then go on to tell him that just as a town is divided into different wards for purposes of convenience . . . so the world is divided into segments . . . but such divisions do not disrupt the unity of the world.  

This notion of world citizenship in effect stemmed from his concept of one God and religious pluralism. It reflected his hopes that reforms in education and a synthesis of culture could resolve both political and social conflicts.

The above also underlay his conception of the mitigation of the so-called conflict between the West and the East. He argued for the compatibility of Western and Eastern cultures, the differences between them being, in his view, an outcome of placing emphasis on different aspects of common problems. It is of interest in this context to examine Azad’s interpretation of the “Occidental” and “Oriental” concepts of man.

Azad maintained that in the West from the earliest times (that of the Greeks) philosophy devoted far greater attention to what man does rather than to what man is. With the advent of Aristotle, a trend was firmly established to focus attention on man as a rational animal, a tendency which ultimately led to Darwinism, Marxism and Freudianism. Conversely, in the East, the focus of attention was directed at man’s inherent spirituality. According to Oriental teachings, an individual cannot be comprehended unless he is regarded as divine emanation, and man is looked upon as the supreme expression of God’s being.

Both the “Western” and “Eastern” concepts of man, however, suffer from a certain one-sidedness in interpreting the essence of man, which has ruinous consequences for
mankind. The “Eastern” concept raises man to the level of deity (the Koran goes as far as to see in man God’s regent on earth) and makes him superior to all creation, master not only of animal life, but also of the forces of nature itself.\textsuperscript{36} Azad admits, however, that this concept also implies an element of fatalism, for since man is an emanation of divinity, whatever he does is due to the will of God. From this it is but another step to think of man “as a mere toy in the hands of fate.”\textsuperscript{37}

Another weakness of the “Eastern” concept, according to Azad, consists in that too much emphasis on the unity of man and God prompts indifference to human suffering, regarded, therefore, as illusory. The outcome is, to quote Azad, that “Eastern societies have often been indifferent to the removal of the causes of social malaise,”\textsuperscript{38} and the concept was often “an impediment to human progress.”\textsuperscript{39}

Conversely, the “Western” concept is distinguished by its heeding the need for social progress, which can be achieved as a result of the individual effort of each and every member of human society. At the same time, it underestimates the spiritual element in man. If man is seen as a rational animal, “there is nothing to prevent his using science to further interests based on the passions he shares in common with animals.”\textsuperscript{40}

Mankind’s salvation can be achieved, according to Azad, through a synthesis of the “Western” and “Eastern” concepts:

If . . . the achievements of Western science can be utilised in the Eastern spirit of man’s affinity with God, science would become an instrument not of destruction, but for the establishment of human prosperity, peace and progress.\textsuperscript{41}

As a matter of fact, these concepts are an attempt to reconcile idealism and materialism and to find a middle
course between them. For Azad, to conclude the necessity
of such a “synthesis” amounts, in our opinion, to evolution
of his views from his unqualified adherence to a religious
world outlook to the understanding that religion is incapable
of resolving some of the most crucial problems of living.

Although he remained a religious man to the last, his
faith in the power of religion as a progressive social factor,
near fanatical at first, was severely shaken. During a
conversation with Mahatma Gandhi’s secretary Mahadev
Desai in 1936, he admitted:

Religion is a force whose power it is impossible to gauge.
A bullock cart in charge of a stupid driver may at the worst
cause an accident resulting in some injury to the driver
and one or two people. But we know what happens when
there is a railway accident. Hundreds of lives are lost and
untold damage is done. Religion is like the mighty steam
engine which needs to be in charge of a skilful and wide-
awake driver. In the hands of an unworthy driver it can
cause untold misery. To our great misfortune religion has
fallen into unworthy hands. They have turned it into
irreligion, and I do not know where we are going.42

Thus, having set himself, at the start of his career, the task
of reading the Koran through the eyes of the first faithful
Muslims, he hoped to uncover the genuine meaning of the
Holy Book which could guide his contemporaries in dealing
with problems posed by life. However, if we accept Azad’s
own just observation, made in the Foreword to his
Commentary on the Koran, that “in every age, the author of a
work is normally the product of his intellectual
environment,”43 adding to this that the environment is a
product of concrete historical and socio-economic
conditions, it becomes obvious that the task Azad set himself
was unattainable. A man of the twentieth century could
not afford to view the world through the eyes of people belonging to the ninth or tenth century. Although he excluded from this rule “those who are gifted with vision and insight,” apparently including himself among those, he failed to avoid in his Commentary subjectivity in the interpretation of Islamic precepts. Despite his intentions, he interpreted the Koran as a man of his epoch, and of concrete historical and social circumstances.

Notes and References

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. XXXVI.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 36.
7. Ibid., p. 102.
8. Ibid., p. 105.
9. Ibid., p. 127.
10. Ibid., p. 136.
11. Ibid., p. 25.
12. Ibid., pp. 48-49.
13. Ibid., p. 68.
14. Ibid., p. 84.
18. Ibid., p. 152.
19. Ibid., p. 159.
20. Ibid., p. 168.
25. Congress backing was due not only to the anti-imperialist nature of the Khilafat movement, but also to the fact that it helped rally the Muslim and Hindu communities in the struggle against colonial rule.
33. Ibid., pp. 150-51.
34. Ibid., p. 180.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 183.
37. Ibid., p. 184.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 185.
41. Ibid., p. 187.