

Madan Mohan Malaviya: A Reformer

Dr. Pankaj Sharma

Assistant Professor

Department of History

N.A.S. College, Meerut

Email: dr.pankajsharma1656@gmail.com

Abstract

Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) played a significant role in Indian Public life for well over fifty years. Four times President of the Indian National Congress, eight times of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, and twice of the All India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, the gamut of his public life was wide enough to include political, social, educational, and religious activities, and he had a personality which enabled him to play a prominent role in all of them with equal felicity. Many of his ideas and actions aroused lively controversies, particularly his championship of Hindi and his efforts at the consolidation of Hindu Society. A critical study of his political ideas and methods should, therefore, constitute an important contribution to our knowledge of the political development of the freedom movement and modern India.

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Dr. Pankaj Sharma

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Born of a poor middle-class family he rose to great heights by sheer dint of merit and hard labor. He came from an orthodox Brahmin family and was duly initiated into the cultural and religious traditions of Sanatana Dharma. At the same time, his parents were sensible enough to provide him with English education. Following the style of public service in the 1880s, he tried his hand at journalism, teaching, law, and finally politics, and served the nation in all these capacities, with distinction. He had a lifelong association with the Congress. He first attended its second session in 1886 and had the rare distinction of rendering unbroken service to the nation for over fifty years. He achieved fame almost from the very start of his political career. He was counted among the most important leaders of the Congress till 1918, and though Gandhi overshadowed all political leaders after the Nagpur Congress session, Pt. Malaviya nevertheless continued to play a significant if not a dominant role in the national movement. This was remarkable, considering the fact that the national movement passed through several phases in its last phase. Malaviya did not fade out or leave the Congress in a hull-like S. N. Banerjee, D.E. Wacha, or M.A. Jinnah.

Part of the explanation for this lies in Malaviya's capacity to respond to new situations, his penchant for adjustment and compromise, and his deep appreciation of the virtue of tolerance. Another reason was his firm belief that the struggle for freedom demanded waited for action and this was possible only through the Congress. Thus, it was that he strove to bridge the gulf between the Moderates and the Extremists during 1905-1908, and between the Congress and the seceders in 1918. For similar reasons, he did not want the Hindu Mahasabha to become a political rival of the Congress. In spite of his many differences with the Congress leadership (especially after 1919), he continued to attend its deliberations and make his contribution to the furtherance of the national cause. His robust patriotism never allowed him to cut himself completely from the main currents of national politics. Even when he so differed from Congress policies that he deemed it necessary to criticize them publicly, he remained in the Congress, worked through it to the extent possible, and never thought of deserting it in times of distress.

Thus, while he apprehended trouble and did not lead his support to Gandhi when he organized national protest on a mass scale against Rowlatt Bills, he was among the first to go to the Punjab after the Jallianwala bagh tragedy. Again when he disagreed with the policies and programs of the Non-Co-operation movement not launched under Gandhi's leadership, he joined the Congress volunteer organization when it was banned by the Government and tried to keep up the national spirit and morale of Congressmen after Gandhi's arrest in March, 1922. In the thirties, he actively participated in the Civil Disobedience movement and went to jail. Although

he could not participate in the Quit India movement due to old age and in bad health, he rendered such help as he could to those who suffered at the hands of British imperialism.

In doing all this, his one aim was the achievement of India's freedom. Therefore, he never hesitated speaking out his mind freely whenever he felt that particular policies and programs of the Congress leadership were likely to do more harm than good for the achievement of the supreme objective. His differences with the Congress pertained mainly to questions of strategy and protection of Hindu interests. He believed in the cultivation of British public opinion in favor of India's demands. He did not believe that the British policy (at any rate during its pre-1919 phase) was entirely opposed to national aspirations. He thought that the boycott of schools was suicidal for national interests. He was against taking hasty steps without making adequate preparations, hurling of challenges indulging in vain rhetoric, unnecessarily antagonizing the government he regarded as infantile. He was always prepared, and did, in fact, strive on number of occasions, to bring about a settlement between the Congress and the government.

A distinct qualitative change came over the Congress after the Nagpur Session of 1920. Gandhi's ideology and his political style virtually became the creed of the Congress. All along the Congress had been a broad national platform where nationalists of all shades of Opinion could find a place and work together. All this seemed to be changing. Many old leaders of the Congress sensed the new mood and feeling uncomfortable in the new situation left the organization Malaviya chose to remain in the Congress and continued to fight from within for keeping the Congress as the broad national platform that it had always been. He opposed the attempts of the Swaraj Party to usurp the mantle of the Congress and formed its own independent Congress Party and later the Swaraj Party to contest elections to the legislatures. He stood for the member's freedom of conscience and action inside the legislature, and on specific questions to did differ from the official policies of the Congress.

This was especially true about matters concerning the protection of Hindu interests. He vehemently opposed the introduction of communal electorates in 1909. He did not subscribe to the Lucknow Pact in 1916 in so far as it endorsed the Muslim demand for a separate electorate. The vacillating attitude of Congress leadership on the issue of Mopla riots led him to assume the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1922. In fact, part of the reason for his opposition to the Swaraj Party and his determination to sponsor independent candidates and form his own party for contesting elections to the legislative assembly can be treated to his distrust of the willingness or capacity of the Congress to adequately safeguard Hindu interests. He was totally

opposed to the Congress policy on the issue of the Communal Award. He was never unjust to Muslims, rendered them help during the riots (he helped build a mosque destroyed during the communal riots near the Hindu University), refused to uphold the idea of Hindu Nationalism, and firmly believed in Hindu-Muslim unity. But he did not believe that the appeasement policy of the Congress was best calculated to achieve this unity. Unmindful of the risk to his reputation as a national leader he condemned Muslim hoodlumism and called upon the Hindus to resist it courageously.

On social and cultural questions he was a liberal. Malaviya knows more than his critics the significance of the old adage **Custom is king**. In matters of social and religious reforms, he would hasten slowly. He was personally opposed to early marriage, but he would not support the Sarda Act, for he believed that child marriage or untouchability, or other social evils could not be abolished only through legislation. Persuasion and education were the ways through which he hoped to accomplish the reforms to which the majority was opposed. All this often placed Malaviya in an unenviable position. He was in a way a disappointment to his friends and followers

In all fields of his public life, While those connected with the Banaras Hindu University bemoaned his clash with the government on political issues, leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha felt that but for his loyalty to the Congress and his pursuit of national unity despite repeated rebuts the Hindu Mahasabha could have been a powerful political force. Congressmen did not relish his pleas for moderation and his advocacy of conciliation with the government in the midst of conflict While social reformers felt unhappy at his conservative outlook and insistence on scriptural sanctions, a sizeable section of orthodox Brahmins regarded him a renegade who professed faith in the Shastras only to distort their import in his desire to promote social reforms. The government, despite his advocacy of peaceful settlement, distrusted him. To Muslims, he was a rabid communalist, only a shade different from Savarkar. He had consequently to suffer many a time the agony of distrust and the criticism of his friends and rough treatment at the hands of his own countryman. But, undaunted, Malayya carried on his multifarious tasks according to his convictions. Even his bitter critics had to respect him for his sincerity, sobriety, And devotion to public service, they were aware of his hold over a sizeable section of the Indian people, and in moments of crisis turned to him for assistance, For example, many Muslim leaders appealed to him to hold a Unity Conference to resolve the communal tangle in 1932 and some of them subsequently admitted that at the conference held at his invitation and under his chairmanship, his patience and the spirit of accommodation was truly remarkable.

He was able to attain this eminence in public life for he was actuated by the highest standards of public conduct and morality. He was, as a rule, courteous and polite but could be absolutely frank when the situation so demanded. He combined moderation with courage, the spirit of compromise with the determination to uphold basic principles and objectives. He preferred to work with others but was prepared to go alone when his conscience so dictated.

In the central and Provincial legislature, where he worked for more than twenty-five years, he pursued the policy of constructive criticism where possible and vigorous opposition where necessary. He was vehement in his denunciation of official high-handedness and repression and vigorous in his advocacy of freedom and justice. His speeches lacked brevity but were marked by careful and painstaking marshaling of facts and arguments. As a conscientious member, he took special pains to attend the sessions of the legislature. He was convinced that if a member found his other engagements of greater urgency so that he had to be absent on many occasions in the house, he should, in all fairness to his constituents and to the nation, resign. He never indulged in personal invectives nor paid uncomplimentary remarks to his opponents but bore defeats and insults with magnanimity.

His performance in the legislature was but a part of his public life which was based on wide human sympathies, unswerving loyalty to human good, and the spirit of dedicated service to his community and nation. He bore an irreproachable character and his integrity was unquestioned. His actions were motivated by a desire to uphold national honor and human dignity and to promote human freedom and social progress in all spheres of life. For all his services to his religion and the nation, Malaviya did not desire even Moksha for himself. He was rightly called "Mahamana." If only we of the present generation could imbibe his high ideal of public life.

Hence, Mahamana Malaviya was a shining star of the galaxy of freedom fighters, a social reformer, a scholar, a pioneer in education, and a religious man. He occupied a very high position in public life and his public activities were numerous. He was a many-sided personality. His personal life was very simple. He was always dressed in immaculate white and was called "the spotless Pandit".

Gurudev Tagore said about him, "Your clarion call has awakened many parts of the country and devoted heroes are gathering around you. May your exhortations touch the heart of everybody and stir him to action." Paying glowing tributes to him Gandhiji wrote, "I found him (Lokmanya Tilak) as lofty as the Himalayas. I thought that it was not possible for me to climb up that height. I then went to Shri Gokhale. He appeared to me like a deep ocean. I found that it was not possible for me to enter so deep...Lastly, I approached Malaviyaji. He seemed to me as crystal-like as the

stream and I decided to have ablutions in the sacred stream.” Hence, He was truly a lighthouse of reforms and a patriot reformer.

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