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**Momin discourse as Subaltern Muslim Nationalism in Late Colonial India: A Study of
A.Q. Ansari's Speeches and Writings**

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Momin discourse as Subaltern Muslim Nationalism in Late Colonial India: A Study of A.Q. Ansari's Speeches and Writings¹

Arshad Amanullah

Abstract

The Momin discourse, a variant of Indian nationalism, emerged in late colonial India. It originated in the Momin/Julaha weaving community's struggle against colonial marginalization and Ashraf hegemony. The Momin discourse contested elite nationalism and promoted a subaltern understanding of Muslim politics rooted in India's socio-historical context. The discourse sought to raise socio-political awareness among non-Momin artisan castes and bring them into electoral politics, thereby contributing to more inclusive democratic visions and foreshadowing future mobilizations of the Pasmanda Muslim communities. The paper approaches the Momin discourse as a resource and a site of theory-building for subaltern Muslim politics. It uses the thought of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, the most prominent Momin leader, as a case study to examine the contours and constitutive elements of the Momin discourse. The All India Momin Conference, which Ansari was associated with, aligned with the Indian National Congress to counter the Muslim League's monopoly over Muslim representation, emphasizing demands for equality, dignity, and political autonomy.

Key terms:

Political autonomy, inclusive nationalism, subaltern mobilization, democratic participation, Ashraf-Pasmanda divide, Momin discourse, social justice

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the contours and constitutive elements of the Momin discourse, a variant of Indian nationalism, that emerged in colonial India. A case study of thoughts of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari (1905–1973), constructed through a close reading of his speeches, statements and writings, the paper suggests that a subaltern understanding of Muslim politics, which the Momin movement conceptualized, is rooted in the socio-material fabric and historical processes of India. The Momin discourse opposed elite-led nationalism and the two-nation theory by contesting Ashraf hegemony and organizing Muslim artisan castes. The Momin discourse originated during the struggle of the Momin/Julaha weaving community against their systemic marginalization by colonial economic disruption and Ashraf social hegemony. The AIMC, a reformist organization-turned-political party, challenged the Muslim League's claim of being the sole spokesperson of all Muslims of India. It maintained political independence but collaborated with the Indian National Congress. The six-point programme, *Nikaat-e Mominin*, and the twelve-point action plans

¹ This is a revised version of the paper presented at a talk delivered at PMML, New Delhi, on 19 June 2025.

that followed demonstrate that the demands for equality, dignity, and political autonomy, are at the heart of Momin discourse. The vision of subaltern nationalism that AIMC promoted celebrated socio-political awakening among non-Momin Muslim artisan castes and sought to organize them for political action. The study makes the case that Momin discourse provided enduring resources for envisioning inclusive democracy in India and foreshadowed later Pasmanda mobilizations.

In addition to a section on the approach and methodology, the paper has four sections: the emergence and growth of All India Momin Conference in British India, transformation of the Momin movement into a political party, opposition to Momin movement and political agency, and discursive tropes of the Momin movement. The last section is divided into two sub-sections: socio-historical critique of Ashraf hegemony and crafting a Momin political community.

Approach and Methodology

What relevance does the All India Momin Conference (AIMC) and its Momin discourse carry to the contemporary moment in the trajectory of the Indian republic and its Muslim citizens? Momin discourse offers discursive resources at a time when diverse imaginations of nationalism are being vigorously debated across the country.² Its politics illuminates a trajectory of subaltern Muslims' participation in electoral democracy and party politics for those who are in search of a way to exercise and experience inclusive nationalism, participation as citizens in the political process and social justice in "New India."

Examining the AIMC and its Momin discourse exemplifies a tradition that runs counter to the established scholarly tradition of studying Muslim politics by normalizing elite-led organizations and their conception of nationalism and marginalizing political imaginations articulated by the subaltern groups.³ The Momin discourse reconfigures the notions of dignity, equality, justice and representation, and it is these reconfigured connotations of these categories that funded the insistence of the Momin leaders on "building our own politics." The principles of social equality, the dignity of labour and the inclusion of historically deprived and marginalized were the building block of Momin politics. Hence, this paper approaches the Momin discourse as a resource for and site of theory-building of subaltern Muslim politics.

² See for a few notable interventions: Yadav, Yogendra, "The Nationalism We Forgot" *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 27 May 2025; Palshikar, Suhas, "Who Stole My Nationalism?" *The Indian Express*, 31 May 2025; Yadav, Yogendra, "When a Nation's Idea of Itself Is Stolen, What Follows Must Be More than Recovery" *The Indian Express*, 5 June 2025. ; Bilgrami, Akeel, "The Nation, the State and the Other: Hindutva's Imprint on Nationalism in India" *The Indian Express*, 16 June 2025; Devy, G N, "The Myths and Utopias of Two Nationalisms" *The Indian Express*, 30 June 2025; Ahmed, Hilal, "Relevant Perspectives: Muslim Imaginations of Nationalism" *The Telegraph Online*, 11 June 2025, https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/relevant-perspectives-muslim-imaginations-of-nationalism-print/cid/2107215#goog_rewarded. (last visited on 02 September 2025).

³ See for example, Hasan, Mushirul, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Husain, Syed Abid, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965); Sohal, A., *The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition* (Oxford: OUP, 2023). Also see: Gandhi, Rajmohan, *Understanding the Muslim Mind* (Penguin Books, 2000).

Scholars have suggested that the Momin Movement (*Momin tahrik*) was the first phase or wave of the Pasmada Movement.⁴ Pasmada ideologues and activists such as Ali Anwar and Dr. Ejaz Ali approvingly mention the contribution of the Momin Movement and the All India Momin Conference towards creating political awareness among Pasmada Muslims and contesting the two-nation theory of the All India Muslim League.⁵ Momin ideologues drew on the political language of Islamic egalitarianism, caste-based principles of fraternity (*biradarikeusul*) and the reconfigured notion of ‘belonging’ to formulate an ideology to mobilize the subaltern caste Muslims to participate in the national freedom struggle to end the British colonial capitalistic domination and the Ashraf hegemony.

Methodologically speaking, this paper draws on speeches, statements and writings of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, who was the most notable Momin politician and the most prominent voice of the Momin movement.⁶ It treats them as its primary sources. Institutional collections rarely preserve the records of subaltern voices, forcing researchers to rely on oral history and public memory.⁷ Hence, it is no surprise that neither the comprehensive collection of A. Q. Ansari’s correspondence nor proceedings of All India Momin Conference are available. The paper has referred to a few of the presidential speeches delivered on the occasion of AIMC’s annual sessions. It performs their close reading to delineate Momin discourse by spotlighting key ideas and concerns of the Momin Movement: democratization of the Muslim power structure and public sphere, fair representation of the subaltern Muslims in the electoral politics and government institutions, economic uplift of and education among the artisan communities, and their social dignity. Further, the paper locates Momin discourse in British India’s socio-political context in which the Momin Movement evolved and facilitated the formation of a social outfit, All India Momin Conference, which matured into a political party. The party contested the 1946 election as an independent Muslim party, entering alliance with the Indian National Congress, challenging the All India Muslim Leagues’ imagination of Muslim nationalism.⁸

Emergence and growth of All India Momin Conference in British India

Why does the community of Muslim weavers call itself “Momin”? The legend surrounding the etymology of the term “Momin” has it that the name came from Momin Arif, a Sufi saint who migrated from Yemen to India in the twelfth century and settled in Maner, near Patna in Bihar. Weaving was his main occupation. A large number of weavers converted to Islam under the influence of his proselytization. He died in Maner, where his

⁴ Ansari, Khalid Anis, “Contesting Communalism (s): Preliminary Reflections on Pasmada Muslim Narratives from North India.” *Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality* 1 (1), 2018.

⁵ Anwar, Ali, *Masawat Ki Jung: Pas-e Manzar Bihar Ke Pasmada Musalman* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2001).

⁶ The following volume is perhaps the most comprehensive collection of A.Q. Ansari’s speeches, writings and statements: Ansari, Ghulam Mujtaba, *Fakhr-e Qaum Abdul Qaiyum Ansari: Ahwal-o-Afkar* (Patna: Abdul Qaiyum Ansari Educational Foundation, 2002). This paper heavily relies on this volume for Ansari’s thoughts.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ansari, Hasan Nishat, *Momin-Congress Relations: A Socio-Historical Analysis* (Patna: Bihar Momin Intellectuals’ Forum, 1989).

mausoleum is still revered. The contemporary Momin community are descendants of his progeny and converted Muslim weavers, who gradually spread out all over India, including Bihar, Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. Thus, other groups that were weavers also acquired the appellation of “Momin.” The *Momin-Ansar* or *Ansari(s)* are two other terms that are used to describe the group.⁹

Another explanation foregrounds the strict adherence to Islam, asceticism and piety, widespread among Muslim weavers for them being self-described as “Momins.” The term “Momin,” which originates in the root “iman,” meaning faith, denotes a person who possesses iman and has internalized Islamic ideals. The term “Muslim,” on the other hand, signifies submission to Allah's will through execution of acts of worship, including prayer, fasting, and zakat. This level of association focuses on external observance of Islamic Sharia.¹⁰

The 1931 Census returns listed *Momin Julaha* as the largest Muslim occupational caste in various provinces, such as United Provinces where they had about one million members. The Momin community in the early 20th century was faced with enormous socio-economic and political challenges. Colonial economic policies, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh-e Islami*)- sanctioned social hierarchies among Muslim communities, and rapid, large-scale industrial transformation were the factors that contributed toward making of these challenges. Handloom weaving, the primary occupation associated with the Julaha caste-based community of the Momins, suffered due to British fabrics, which flooded the Indian markets. They were produced industrially at a large scale and were cheap. Census data from the late 19th and early 20th century reported a sharp decline in the demand for handwoven clothes. Thus, colonial policies led to the deskilling of a large population of weavers, forcing them to lose their status as independent artisans. They were rendered jobless and poor, with no choice but to become landless labourers. Their low status in the Muslim social hierarchy was considered a *legit* ground for their being subjected to systemic discrimination, social contempt and ridicule, and forced unpaid labour (*begaar*) by the Ashraf caste groups. Illiteracy was high among the Momin community. Their almost zero representation in the institutions of social and political power structure, in addition to their educational backwardness, render them vulnerable for political marginalization and exploitation of their skill and artisanship by the Ashraf and British ruling elite.¹¹

⁹ Maneri, Shamsuddin Ahmad Shams, “Momin Tahreek Ka Aghaz” In *Momin Conference Ki Dastawezi Tarikh (Urdu)*, edited by Ashfaq Husain Ansari, 434–49 (Delhi: Momin Media, 2000). Also see: Datta, K.K., *Introduction to Bihar Indian History Congress, 9th Session, Patna*, 1946, Indian History Congress, p. 63.

¹⁰ See for a discussion on Muslim-Momin distinction: Aijaz, Imran, “The Sceptical Muslim.” *Religious Studies* 59 (3), 2023, p. 495–514.

¹¹ This portrayal of the socio-material and symbolic conditions of the Momin-Ansari community in the early twentieth century is substantiated by scholarly works anchored in the wide range of archival sources, their rigorous analysis and robust explanatory framework. To mention a few: Ansari, Ghaus, *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact* (Lucknow: The Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, 1960); Rai, S K. *Weaving Hierarchies: Handloom Weavers in Early Twentieth Century United Provinces* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2021); Raman, V., *Entangled Yarns: Banaras Weavers and Social Crisis* (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013); Roy, T., *The Crafts and Capitalism: Handloom Weaving Industry in Colonial India* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020).

The All India Momin Conference symbolized the formalization of a series of deliberations and attempts of the first two decades of the twentieth century to form an organization that could function as a platform for the advocacy and discussions about the miserable socio-economic conditions of the Momin (Muslim weavers) community. Literature suggests that the 1910s and 1920s witnessed several attempts at floating such organizations in various parts of the country. Qazi Abdul Jabbar formed Anjuman ul Islah bil Falah at a meeting held in Calcutta in 1912, to be renamed Anjuman FalahulMominin in 1913. In Patna, around 1915, prominent members of the community started “a series of debates and discussions, circulated handbills and campaigned in the newspapers to form an organisation of the Momins.”¹² They included Zamiruddin, an engineer, Maula Baksh, the founder of the Noorani Dawakhana, and Master Mohammad Jan. In 1915, Hakim Abdul Ghani Ghazipuri presided over a meeting of Jamiat Mominin that was held in Calcutta. In 1918, Ali Hussain, popularly known as Asim Bihari, floated an organization in Calcutta. Likewise, Jamiat Ansarian was formed in Bihar. In 1919, yet another organization “Jamiat Ansarian” was formed in Bihar. Further, Jamiatul Mominin, Calcutta that was established in 1923, was renamed All India Jamiatul Momineen in 1926 with a mandate to expand the scope of the Momin movement in the whole country and to coordinate among various organizations working for the welfare of the Momin community.¹³

It was this All India Jamiatul Momineen that was christened All India Momin Conference (AIMC) in 1929. Prominent Momin leaders who were associated with AIMC and were active politicians included Abdul Qaiyum Ansari (1905–1973), Abul Ahad Mohammad Noor (1899- 1974), Mohammad Nizamuddin¹⁴, Istifa Husain¹⁵ (1914-1987), Ziaur Rahman Ansari (1925-1992), Mohammed Amin Ansari¹⁶ (1934-1990), Habibur Rahman Nomani¹⁷ (1926-2005), and others. Their speeches, statements and writings provide information about the objectives, demands and socio-political activities of AIMC.

¹² Ghosh, Papiya, “Contesting the Sharif: The Momin Conference.” In *Muhajirs and the Nation: Bihar in the 1940s*, 89–109 (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010).

¹³ Azizi, Alauddin, *A.Q. Ansari: Social Philosophy and Political Thought* (Sarup & Son, 2005), p. 19. Also see: Arfi, Khurshid Anwar, *Momin Tahreek Aur Momin-Ansar Biradari (Urdu)* (New Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2016), pp.98-110.

¹⁴ Advocate Mohammad Nizamuddin was elected the Deputy Chairman of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council on 27 May 1952. He served until 1964.

¹⁵ Istafa Husain Ansari got elected to the UP Legislative Assembly twice in 1952 and 1957. He was made Member of the Legislative Council of UP twice in 1966 and 1972. He was a Cabinet Minister in-charge of the small-scale industries from 1973-1975.

¹⁶ Mohammed Amin Ansari, now deceased, was a member of Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly from 1980 to 1985. During this period, he was a minister in the Government of Uttar Pradesh. He was the General Secretary, Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee (I) from 1979 to 1981. Between 3-4-1988 and 14-7-1990, he was a member of Rajya Sabha. See: Kumar, D.S. Prasanna, ed. 2019, *Rajya Sabha Members Biographical Sketches 1952-2019* (New Delhi: The Secretary-General Rajya Sabha, 2019).

https://cms.rajyasabha.nic.in/UploadedFiles/ElectronicPublications/Member_Biographical_Book.pdf.

¹⁷ Habibur Rahman Nomani was a member of (i) Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, 1969-74 and (ii) Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council, 1975-80. He served as the Minister of State/Deputy Minister of Transport in the Government of Uttar Pradesh from 1970 to 1972 and from 1976 to 1977. Between 1973 and 1975, he was the General Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee. Likewise, he became a member of Rajya Sabha from 27.8.1993 to 26.8.1999. See: Kumar, D.S. Prasanna, ed. *Rajya Sabha Members Biographical Sketches 1952-2019* (New Delhi: The Secretary-General Rajya Sabha, 2019).

https://cms.rajyasabha.nic.in/UploadedFiles/ElectronicPublications/Member_Biographical_Book.pdf

The arguments, concerns, critiques and themes present in them form the foundational elements of Momin discourse.

The All India Momin Conference (AIMC) was concerned with practical issues related to backward population of Indian Muslims.¹⁸ For example, Shamsuddin Ahmad Shams Maneri¹⁹ who delivered his presidential speech at the Calcutta session (22-23 March 1925) of Calcutta Momin Conference chose to focus on “worldly development and decline of Momin community.”²⁰ He informed his audience that the Momin population in India was almost half of its Muslim population, meaning if the whole Muslim population stood at 70 million then the Momins alone were approximately 35 million in 1925. He described their numerical majority as a “great strength” but emphasized that the “religious commitment and adherence to Islam” was the source of a greater strength to the Momin community.²¹

The issues which Maneri dwelt upon in his lecture, were clear from the following keywords that formed various sub-headings which he organized in his thoughts: definition, origin, history, nomenclature, etc. of Momin community; critique of Muslim and British rule in India; social, economic and educational backwardness of Momin community; critique of caste-centric understanding of nobility (*sharafat*) and lowliness (*razalat*); lack of resistance to Ashraf’s oppression on and denigration of the community; need for a strong and active organization and periodicals, etc.²² According to the proceedings of the Gaya session (10-12 November 1934) of AIMC, a total of 12 resolutions were passed on 11 November 1934 during the session. One of them reflected the organization’s concerns for forced labour.²³

A survey of themes that anchored the presidential speeches (*sadaratikhutbat*) delivered in different sessions confirms that the issues they raised were directly related to the everyday problems of the Momin community. Its presidential speeches kept coming back to the following issues: promotion of education in the Momin community, enabling them to participate in all spheres of life and compete with other social groups; critique of those Muslim organizations that have vested interests in dividing society into *sharif* and *razil* groups; lack of political awareness in the Momin community and the need to transform the AIMC into a political outfit; and the need to establish cooperative societies of handloom weavers as a step toward renewal of the handloom industry, which is the primary source of income for the weavers. Another recurring issue, briefly touched upon, was the necessity of launching and maintaining community publications, owning a printing press, and publishing a daily newspaper. However, no planned communication and publicity strategy was ever shared.

The substantial growth in the AIMC membership and popular participation in its events signified the resonance of these issues with what the Momin community faced everyday. More than 4000 delegates from Punjab, Bombay, CP, Hyderabad, Rohelkhand,

¹⁸ Cultural politics conceptualized in terms of emotional issues like Urdu, religious places, etc., was not on the AIMC agenda. In fact, the question of Urdu-Hindi never found mention in any of its Presidential Addresses.

¹⁹ Shamsuddin Ahmad Shams Maneri was trained in law and served as a faculty member of the Law department of Ravenshaw College of Cuttack. The college was established in 1868.

²⁰ Ansari, Ashfaq Husain, ed., *Momin Conference Ki Dastawezi Tarikh* (Urdu) (Delhi: Momin Media, 2000) p. 73.

²¹ Ansari, *Momin Conference*, p 82.

²² See: Ansari, *Momin Conference*, pp. 49-82.

²³ Ansari, *Momin Conference*, p 269.

Oudh, UP, Bengal, Burma, etc. came to Gaya to attend its annual session in 1934. Likewise, 2000 delegates and 15,000 visitors participated in its annual session in 1943 in Delhi.²⁴ Its managing committee, according to a resolution passed in 1926, had 52 members from all over India. Though Momin Movement started from Calcutta and had a strong presence in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, by the 1930s it was active in many other parts of India.²⁵

Transformation of Momin movement into a political party

Search for equality and dignity within the ideological framework of Islam remained on top of the AIMC agenda. However, its scope seems to have gradually widened to include the need for political representation, government employment, possibilities of a collaboration with like-minded organisations, etc. In his Presidential Address in its session (9-11 October 1937) at Kanpur, Abdul Aziz²⁶ spoke with clarity on these issues: “Apart from equality, the aim of our community movement (*qaumitahreek*) also includes educational, social and economic development. There is a need that our representatives should join municipalities and councils. We also need government employment.”²⁷

In fact, the demand for the AIMC’s participation in the national electoral politics was first articulated in its Lahore session in 1933. It decided in 1938 during its Gorakhpur session to change itself into a political party and participate in electoral politics, though it began as a social organisation. As a political party, the demands of AIMC, known as *Nikaat-e Mominin*, were the six-point programme A.Q. Ansari propounded in his Darbhanga address in 1938 for the political, economic, and educational empowerment of the Momin community. They were as follows:

- (i) At least one minister of the central government and each of the provincial governments should be a Momin.
- (ii) Reservation of 50 percent of the seats allotted to Muslims in the federal and provincial legislatures for members of the Momin community.
- (iii) Reservation of seats in local self-government bodies such as district boards, municipalities, etc. in proportion to their population.
- (iv) Reservation of seats in the government and semi-government employments in proportion to their population. If a certain percentage of seats is reserved in the future for the Muslim community, half of the reserved seats should be earmarked for the Momin community.
- (v) Special government facilities for the general education, technical education, and weaving training of Momin boys and girls.
- (vi) The state protection and aid for the handloom industry.

²⁴ Manglori, Syed Tufail Ahmad, *Musلمانوں کا روشن مستقبل (Urdu Monograph)* (Delhi: Kutub Khana Azeeziya, 1945) p. 579.

²⁵ Ghosh, *Contesting the Sharif*, p. 90.

²⁶ Abdul Aziz was from Dhuliya of western Khandesh region of Maharashtra. He was elected to the Legislative Council of Bombay. He remained associated with All India Momin Conference for most of his working life.

²⁷ Ansari, *Momin Conference*, p. 297. For the full text of his address, see pp. 277-300.

The Momin community endorsed the *Nikaat-e Mominin* (Six Points) in a number of public meetings held in various parts of the country.²⁸ Special emphasis that the AIMC laid on the acquisition of political power was evident and so was the readiness of the community to strive to exercise that power. In fact, the AIMC compiled these demands in “A Statement Regarding the Aims and Objects, Policy and Programme of the All India Momin Conference” and handed over to Cripps Commission on 8 December 1939.²⁹ In his speech in 1939 in Ghazipur, A.Q. Ansari presented a detailed action plan to achieve the demands of the *Nikaat-e Mominin*, identifying 16 focus areas.³⁰

This 16-point action plan was indicative of the scope of the political and social work of the AIMC. A fair assessment of the success of the plan is not possible given the paucity of authoritative data in terms of the AIMC’s own documentation. By 1943 the AIMC had some 500 committees particularly in UP and Bihar, where the bulk of the Momin community was concentrated.³¹ In the wake of implementation of Government of India Act 1935, it fielded its candidates in various elections. For example, it fielded a few candidates in the election for the Calcutta Corporation and two of them won, defeating the Muslim League’s candidates. This gives some idea about the extent to which the Momin community worked toward materializing the 16-points action plan, the scale of political activities of the AIMC and its growing significance in the electoral politics.³²

The AIMC was one of seven Muslim bodies which convened the Independent Muslim Conference in Delhi between 27 and 30 April 1940. Political commentators believed that the conference gave a boost to the national standing of the AIMC and strengthened its position as an important anti-AIML Muslim body. From 1940 onward, AIMC participated with all enthusiasm in almost all pro-independence movements, making an important contribution to the anti-colonial freedom struggle.³³

Opposition to the Momin movement and political agency

The AIMC faced criticism from political and religious leadership of the Ashraf Muslims. The organization was accused of dividing the Muslim community along the lines of caste. Addressing a session (10-12 November 1934) of the Conference at Gaya, Mohammad Nizamuddin Advocate³⁴ engaged with some of these criticisms by explaining the need for Momins to have a separate forum. He contended that the Ashraf-led so-called all-Muslim

²⁸ Ansari, Ghulam Mujtaba, *Fakhr-e Qaum Abdul Qaiyum Ansari: Ahwal-o-Afkar* (Patna: Abdul Qaiyum Ansari Educational Foundation, 2002) pp. 176-177.

²⁹ Ghosh, *Contesting the Sharif*, pp. 100-101.

³⁰ Ansari, *Fakhr-e Qaum Abdul Qaiyum Ansari*, pp. 177-178.

³¹ Ghosh, *Contesting the Sharif*, p. 90.

³² Arfi, *Momin Tahreek aur Momin-Ansar Biradari*, pp. 126-127.

³³ Manglori, Syed Tufail Ahmad, *Rooh-e Raushan Mustaqbil (Urdu Monograph)* (Badaun: Nizami Press, 1946).

³⁴ At the time of delivering this Presidential Address, Nizamuddin was an advocate practicing at Allahabad High Court. Later he served as Municipal Commissioner of Allahabad. He was appointed Assistant Pleader at Allahabad High Court on 15 September 1938. Later, he was elected to the position of Deputy Chairman of Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly (1952-1964). He was one of prominent members of All India Momin Conference.

organizations had been discriminating against the Momin community, even though such discriminations were “against the teachings of Islam.” Had that not been the case, “there would not have been any need to establish Jamiatul Mominin³⁵, rather this organization would have been called Jamiatul Muslimin.”³⁶

The pro-All India Muslim League (AIML) publications published reports and editorials which reflected that the AIML was concerned about growing political influence of the AIMC as a Muslim political party. The AIML was critical of the AIMC because of its non-confrontation of the INC and also the AIMC’s projection of the AIML as the party of Muslim landlords and capitalists only. For example, the headline of a news report in 1939 in the Urdu daily *Ittehad*, a Patna-based publication, read: “The Congress’ despicable actions to create a rift among Muslims, attempting to pit the Momin community against the Muslim League” (*Musalmano me phootdalnekekiye Congress ki mazmumharkat, Momin biradari ko Muslim League kekhilafhadakarne ki koshish*).³⁷ The report informed its readers of a dangerous conspiracy (*khaufnaksazish*) which the AINC was hatching to sow seeds of disunity among Muslims. Though the details of the conspiracy were awaited, the proof that the newspaper presented was a “secret meeting” (*khufiyaguft-o-shunid*) the AIMC leadership had had with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in Allahabad. According to the Congress newspapers, the report continued, “the Congress now will try to convince Muslims, by passing Mr. Jinnah.” The report labeled the Momin community as “not educated”, whom the Congress was trying to install “to oppose the Muslim League and to get the Muslims engaged in infightings.”

In 1945, the same newspaper ran a detailed editorial titled “Where are the Momins heading to?” (*Momin kidharjarahe hain?*) to express the same concerns.³⁸ Here is the relevant quote from the editorial:

But where are the Momins heading to? Destroying the unity of the Muslims, they want to launch their own party. ... After all, the issue of their representation is not something that cannot be sorted out internally. Then, is accusing the Muslims, causing harm to their political organisation, and openly opposing the national goal of all Muslims—the service of the Momin community—or the worst example of worshipping the others?

The editorial appealed to the Momin community to think about how, having separated from the Muslims, a Momin can be “useful” for his community. It referred to a public session of the AIMC in which the speakers criticized the AIML but “propagated” the aims of the Congress “in the garb of the Momin movement.” The editorial described such an anti-League and pro-Congress political positioning of the Momin leaders as confusing.

³⁵ It was All India JamiatulMominin which was rechristened later as All India Momin Conference.

³⁶ Ansari, *Momin Conference*, pp. 239-241. For the full text of his address, see pp. 238-252.

³⁷ Ittehad Desk, “Musalmano me phootdalnekekiye Congress ki mazmumharkat, Momin biradari ko Muslim League kekhilafhadakarne ki koshish (The Congress’ despicable actions to create a rift among Muslims, attempting to pit the Momin community against the Muslim League).” *Ittehad* (Patna), 24 December 1939.

³⁸ Ahmad, Sultan, “Momin Kidhar Ja Rahe Hain? (Where Are the Momins Heading To?).” *Ittehad* (Patna), 4 October 1945.

Though the majority of Momin community was opposed to the All India Muslim League, three prominent Momin leaders namely Sardar Latifur Rahman of Gaya, Khan Bahadur Mobarak Karim of Bihar Sharif and Khan Bahadur Abdul Jalil Advocate of Darbhanga never quit the League.³⁹ They gradually got sidelined in the organization and politics of the AIMC.

In the 1946 election, the AIMC won 6 Assembly seats in Bihar. Its candidates defeated their Muslim League opponents. Two most popular Momin leaders were inducted in the government of Bihar, A.Q. Ansari as a cabinet minister while Abul Ahad Mohammad Noor was made the Secretary of the Parliamentary Affairs.

Discursive tropes of Momin movement in British India

The archives are not of much help in recovering Momin voices. Archival traces of Momin communicative actions and political activities are scant. This section will draw on writings and speeches of the most notable Momin leader A.Q. Ansari to outline and elaborate the contours of Momin discourse.

Socio-historical critique of Ashraf hegemony

Constitutive elements of the Momin identity

The Momin identity is conceptualized as the composite of three constitutive elements: 1. Indians (Hindustani), 2. Muslims, and 3. Momin Ansar. This was the sequence which A.Q. Ansari mentioned in his presidential address in Bijnor on 29 September 1939 and argued that all three elements should be taken into consideration while determining the AIMC's stand on any given issue. Having examined the question of support to the United Kingdom in the Second World War from all three perspectives, he told the audience that he was convinced that the Momin community should support and cooperate with the United Kingdom in the war against the Nazis. He presented his arguments and evidence in detail, first from the viewpoint of Indians, then from the Muslim point of view, and last from the Momins' standpoint.⁴⁰ In a subsequent speech, he elaborated on the notion of the Momin identity by declaring Indianness (Hindustani) and Muslimness (Islami) as two dimensions of the community. Every Momin belongs to two communities: Hindustani biradari (Indian community) and Islami biradari (Islamic community). To elaborate on these communities, A.Q. Ansari added:

The Momin community also resides in Hindustan; it is a part of the Indian fraternity and can never be separate from it. Similarly, in terms of religious beliefs, there is an Islamic community. Based on this, our [Momin] community is included in the Islamic

³⁹ Arfi, *Momin Tahreek aur Momin-Ansar Biradari*, p.124.

⁴⁰ Ansari, Abdul Qaiyum, "Dosari Alami Jang Hindustan Ka Maamla Aur Momin Ansar Jamat Ka Tarz-e Amal", Presidential Address Delivered on the Occasion of Bijnor District Ansar Conference, at Nahaura in Bijnor on 29-30 September & 1 October 1939, *Haftawar Momin Duniya* (Patna), 08 January 1976.

community, and in religious and communal matters, it is neither separate from the Islamic community nor can it be.⁴¹

Also, the Momins are aware of the other two aspects of identity, namely the religious and national. These two aspects determine coexistence and collaboration for each and every Momin subject.

... in Islamic and Indian matters, it must coexist with Muslims of India and the general population of India, respectively. With the former, it shares the religious affiliation while with the latter, it shares the concerns of the nation. It is essential to work in collaboration with one of them on the religious affairs, while with the other on national affairs.⁴² (P. 206).

Socio-historical critique of Ashraf hegemony

The Ashraf feature in the Momin discourse as an “enemy” or the “other”. In Ansari’s views, the Ashraf are the culprit of the caste-based oppressions against the Momins, which rendered the latter weak and incapable of fighting effectively against the British colonial forces. Hence, the Ashraf oppression against the Momins and other Muslim artisan communities was a significant reason for the success of British colonialism in uprooting the Muslim rule in India. He expressed these views in his speech at Bijnor in 1939.⁴³

The Momin discourse accuses the Ashraf of not practicing Islamic ideal of social equality. Their refusal to embrace the social equality doctrine of Islam has been at the heart of the backwardness of the majority of Indian Muslims. In his speech at Kagnara in 1939, he said:

I believe that the greatest threat to the survival of Muslims here is that an influential class of Muslims has rejected the principle of Islamic equality and has divided those who believe in the declaration ‘There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger’ into categories such as Syed, Shekh, Mughal, Pathan, Julaha, Kunjda, Qasai, Dhuniya, Nai, and Dhobi, among others.... ... One group is referred to as noble (sharif) and the other as base (razil). ... Thus, it can be said that nearly 80 million individuals out of 90 million [Muslims] are counted among the base (razil). Is this not a reality? And can anyone deny this truth? Now, if it is asked how, you can protect Islam in India and ensure the safety of Muslims while more than 8 out of 9 Muslims are kept as inferior, base, disgraceful, backward, and illiterate, what would your answer be?⁴⁴

The Momin discourse discerns two phases in the historical process of decline of the Momins and other Muslim artisan communities into *razil* subjects. This two-phase

⁴¹ Ansari, Abdul Qaiyum, *Presidential Address on 26 May 1939, at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana, West Bengal* (Kagnara, Chaubis Pargana: Jamiatul Ansar Madrasa Naziriya, 1939).

⁴² Ansari, Presidential address on 26 May 1939, at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

⁴³ Ansari, *Dosari alami jang Hindustan ka maamla aur Momin Ansar jamat, Haftawar Momin Duniya*.

⁴⁴ Ansari, Presidential address on 26 May 1939, at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

explanation of the transformation in their social standing adds a dimension of history-time to its critique of Ashraf hegemony. Ansari presented this two-phase explanation in his speech at Kagnara in 1939 while advancing his critique of the Ashraf's practice of anti-Islamic ideals of inequality and injustice. Succinctly put, here is his two-phase explanation: Muslim rulers, aristocrats, and political elite abandoned millions of skilled Muslims by excluding them from spaces of knowledge, power and prestige/status. Various occupations became the basis for the formation of distinct artisan communities. These communities of Muslim skilled workers were deprived of "the universal rights of Islamic brotherhood and equality" and were forced to live "a life of humiliation and degradation." This left them without "the spirit of resistance" and touch with "national politics." Meanwhile, the ruling elite's indulgence in pleasure and disinterest in governance rendered them weak and ineffective. The inevitable and obvious consequence of this was that the body politic of Islam (*Islam ka jism*) became weak.⁴⁵ It flows from this line of reasoning that the Momin discourse views the Ashraf's rejection of Islam's social equality doctrine as one of the factors contributing to the decline in political influence of the Muslim community.⁴⁶ The second phase of the explanation of the decline of the Momins and other Muslim artisan communities into *arzal-ajlaf* subjects started with the advent of the British colonialism which destroyed the handloom sector, rendering the Momins poor and unemployed.

The Momin community as victim of British colonialism

Colonialism, in addition to the Ashraf hegemony, feature in the Momin discourse as a force of decline and destruction. It describes the Momin community as the one that suffered the most from the British colonialism. On one hand, it holds the Ashraf accountable for the social backwardness and political underrepresentation of the Momin community while on the other, the British colonialism responsible for the community's economic backwardness.

... The community that the establishment of the British Empire in this country has caused the most harm to, is our Momin community, meaning the clothes-weaving community. It destroyed our industry to promote Manchester and Lancashire, rendering us completely devastated economically. The inevitable and shattering result of this economic destruction has manifested in the form of our educational and moral decline. As a result, we have become even more humiliated in the eyes of our co-religionists. ...⁴⁷

A few months later, in his speech at Bijnor in 1939, A.Q. Ansari echoed the same critique of the destructive impact of the British colonialism on the Momin community. But

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, two significant elements of the social reality of Indian Muslims, namely outsiders vs. natives (*videshi Ashraf vs. deshaj Pasmanda*) and the converted Muslims vs. ancestral Muslims (*jadidul Islam vs qadimul Islam*) are absent from his critique and explanation. Further, though this two-phase explanation does not stand the test of historicity and scientific scrutiny, it is perhaps the most comprehensive and coherent reading of the marginalization of the Muslim artisan communities propounded by a Pasmanda politician. In a way, it is infused with history-sense and identifies a range of stakeholders and historical players relevant for the marginalization process.

⁴⁷ Ansari, Presidential Address on 7 April 1939, District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur.

here he differentiated between the humiliation due to its low location in the caste hierarchy and the humiliation due to poor financial condition. Thus, by introducing a typology of two types of humiliation and discrimination the Momin community suffered from, and mapping them onto the socio-economic and political processes, he refined our understanding of the sources of social contempt and dignitylessness.

The British rule devastated this [Momin] community of artisans the most in order to promote the textile industry of its own country. When the East India Company unleashed worst atrocities on this community to completely destroy this weaving industry, the Ashraf Muslims did not help the Momin community at all. ... The British rule devastated the Momin community in every way. Previously, it had no respect or honour in society, and now, due to worsening financial conditions, it has become utterly degraded and humiliated. The responsibility for our poverty and humiliation largely lies with the British Empire....⁴⁸

Interestingly, A.Q. Ansari trusted the British government more than the Ashraf as far as the political demands and rights of the Momin community were concerned: “If Britain loses the war, our high caste Muslim brothers of fake pedigree (*oonchizat wale masnuyi sharif Musalman bhai*) will start to trouble us.”⁴⁹ He believed that the Ashraf oppression against the Momins and other Muslim artisan communities was a significant reason for the success of British colonialism in uprooting the Muslim rule in India.

Crafting a Momin political community

Relationships with the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League

The idea of Momin electoral politics emerged in the backdrop of the Government of India Act 1935 and took shape in the tumultuous period characterized with political churning triggered by the Second World War. It was in this context that A.Q. Ansari argued that the AIMC should join politics but not the AIML, neither the INC. His views reflected the emerging consensus among Momin leaders that if the Momins as a collective did not participate in electoral politics, the hegemons of Muslim politics (*Musalmano ki siyasirahnumaikethedar*) would “sideline the Momin community in elections like a fly in milk, as had always been the case.”⁵⁰ He addressed a few gatherings of the Momin population in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal in 1938 and 1939. In his Darbhanga (1938) and Ghazipur (1939) speeches, he emphasised on the need of the Momin community to take to political action, chalk out a strategy for itself and have its own position vis-à-vis the Second World War. The AIMC was an autonomous political institution which represented and provided guidance to around 45 million Momin community. He underlined that the AIMC should create its own politics, instead of joining one of the two dominant political parties. The amendment made in the AIMC’s Constitution in 1935 included, among its objectives, to make “efforts for the political development”, in addition to “efforts for the

⁴⁸ Ansari, Dosari alami jang Hindustan ka maamla aur Momin Ansar jamat, *Haftawar Momin Duniya*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ansari, Presidential address on 26 May 1939 at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

educational, economic and social progress of the Momin community.”⁵¹He interpreted this amendment as the recognition on the part of the community of the need to enter active electoral politics as a collective and group (*jamati haisiyat se*) when the time was ripe.

He sent a wireless message to the Viceroy on 7 September 1939 asserting that the AIMC was the sole representative of around 45 million Indian Muslims and hence was “not bound to follow the views and decisions of Muslim League and other political parties.” The assertion of this wireless message acquires significance because the Viceroy had invited leaders of various political parties to present their views on the evolving international scenario. The aim of sending this telegram message, according to him, was “to keep the position of the Momin Conference clear and to prevent our silence from being interpreted in any negative way.” His rationale for sending the telegram message was to make the INC, AIML, and other political parties aware that “the Momin community has an independent political organisation,” which was separate from them and “not bound to agree with” their opinions and decisions.⁵²

A.Q. Ansari provides the following reasons for his advocacy for the political autonomy and independence of the AIMC:

Considering our population and with the intention of exploiting weaknesses and vulnerabilities of our community, both political parties are trying to lure us. The Congress is calling us by showcasing its national status, while the League is emphasizing on the similarity of religion between the AIMC and AIML. However, the All India Momin Conference has decided that we should not participate in any group as a collective entity. ... The remedy for our ailments lies neither with the League nor with the Congress. Both are concerned with making the Momin community a means to achieve their own goals. The truth is that the solution to our problems is in our own hands; that solution is our Conference.⁵³

Ansari’s reasoning for not joining the INC seems to have emanated from the Congress’ ambiguous position on *Nikaat-e Momineen*. His letter on 9 October 1939 to the INC president Dr. Rajendra Prasad remained unanswered but his letter to Nehru did elicit a response.⁵⁴Nehru agreed with the former’s analysis of the predicaments of the Momins (Ashraf hegemony and marginalization of the Momin community) and his “final objectives.”He wrote:

I entirely agree with you in your remark that certain upper class groups among the Muslims have more or less dominated the Muslims in India, much to the disadvantage of the others. This applies even more so to the Hindus, as you well know, where some upper class groups have dominated vast numbers of other

⁵¹ Ansari, Presidential Address on 7 April 1939, District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur.

⁵² Ansari, *Dosari alami jang Hindustan ka maamla aur Momin Ansar jamat, Haftawar Momin Duniya*.

⁵³ Ansari, Abdul Qaiyum, *Presidential Address Entitled Nikaat-e Mominin Yani Momin Jamaat Ke Chhe Buniyadi Motalabat, Delivered on 25 June 1938*, (Darbhanga: Darbhanga District Jamiatul Ansar Conference, 1938).

⁵⁴ Interestingly, institutional collections have no record of any written communication between A.Q. Ansari and prominent Congress Muslim leaders, such as Abul Kalam Azad, Syed Mahmood, and Rafi Ahmad Kidwai.

people. The problem is essentially similar in both cases. This domination has been cultural, educational, etc., but essentially it has been economic.⁵⁵

However, Nehru described some of the six points of *Nikaat-e Momineen*, such as appointment of a Momin minister, as unfeasible and undesirable. He argued that "... it is very dangerous to lay down a policy that ministers should be appointed communally." Likewise, he declined to support the demand for reservation of seats for the Momin candidates in the legislature and educational institutions. Nehru wrote: "As for the reservation of seats for Momins in the central and provincial legislatures, do you not think that such reservation, though perhaps somewhat advantageous to begin with, will be injurious to a great community like the Momins?" Nehru believed the contemporary form of reservation in British India had "not done us much good." Further, he was averse to the idea of extending reservation "communally." So, he advised Ansari that "The way to approach the question is to have a large number of suitable Momin candidates stand for election. This would apply to local bodies also, where again reservation would be bad."⁵⁶

His justification for not joining the AIML is much more detailed than the same for the INC.⁵⁷ It shows that the challenges from the AIML were more serious, and hence efforts to counter its appeal to the Momin leaders had to be stronger. The main discursive strategy he deployed to expose the hollowness of the AIML's claims was to demonstrate and highlight how its top leadership's key decisions ran contrary to the interest of the Momin community. He presented two examples to support his argument that the AIML's apex leadership makes anti-Momin decisions: the 1938 by-election in Patna's urban constituency, and absence of Momin representative in the AIML's Executive Council.

A.Q. Ansari's first example concerned Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah's decisions concerning the 1938 by-election in the urban constituency of Patna, which "deeply disappointed the Momin community regarding the League."⁵⁸ Despite the requests from the Momin community, Mr. Jinnah denied a League ticket to a Momin representative. A.Q. Ansari accused the provincial League authorities of playing tricks to "ensure that a representative from the Momin community would not be elected to the Assembly." The League members' success in denying the Momin representative a ticket alarmed the Momin

⁵⁵ J.L. Nehru to A.Q. Ansari, 14 November 1939, in, Gopal, S., ed., *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*. Vol. 10. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977), pp. 374-376.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ In addition to the AIMC, the following Muslim outfits were also opposed to the AIML's version of Muslim nationalism: Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, Majlis-i-Ahrar, the All India Shia Political Conference, Khuda'i Khidmatgars, the Bengal Krishak Praja Party, Anjuman-i-Watan Baluchistan, the All India Muslim Majlis, and Jamiat Ahl-i Hadis. Their delegates attended the Azad Muslim Conference held in April 1940, to oppose the AIML's demand for a Pakistan based on its two-nation theory. See for details: Qasmi, Ali Usman, and Megan Eaton Robb, "Introduction: Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of Pakistan." In *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of Pakistan*, edited by Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb, 1-34, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Also see: Islam, Shamsul, *Muslims Against Partition: Revisiting the Legacy of Allah Bakhsh and Other Patriotic Muslims*, (New Delhi: Pharos, 2015).

This paper focuses on the AIMC's critique of the AIML's claims to be the sole representative of the interests of the Indian Muslims.

⁵⁸ Ansari, Presidential Address entitled 'Nikaat-e Momin' in Darbhanga District Jamiatul Ansar Conference.

community and made them realize that the Momins “must now stand on their own feet, as extending their hands in supplication to others brings nothing but humiliation and regret!”⁵⁹

A.Q. Ansari’s second example related to Mr. Jinnah’s decisions to nominate twenty-one members to the AIML Executive Council. However, among these twenty-one individuals, there was not a single member from the Momin community. Highlighting the zero Momin representation in the AIML Executive Council, A.Q. Ansari questioned if the AIML leadership “could not find even a single representative for the Leagues Executive Council among its 4.5 million population! Further, he told his audience that “This decision has saddened the hearts of the entire Momin population. This is not a trivial matter. It reveals the mindset of the Leagues leaders.”⁶⁰

Building upon this argument and two examples, Ansari advised the Momin leadership that “We should invoke the name of God and, with determination, enter the political arena as a united entity.”⁶¹ His advocacy for a separate politics for the Momins has three elements - political autonomy, relevance to the national politics, distinct location – which he elaborated in his 1939 public speech at Ghazipur. He said: “Keeping in mind our large numbers and the fraternity principles (*usool-e biradari*), and also because we are subjected to the unjust and un-Islamic behaviour by others”, the need of the hour is that “We must build our own politics, completely separate from the politics of Congress and the Muslim League.” The numerical strength of the Momin community made it relevant to the national politics. In his words, “the number of the Momin community is half of the total Muslim population in India.” Since the Momin community firmly adheres to “its strong principles of fraternity (*biradarikopakhtausolon*) and does not wish to abandon them, it enjoys a distinct location among Muslims. Further explicating the fraternity principles of the Momin community, he said:

This is because when the upperclass Muslims began to treat the Momin community with disdain and started to regard it as inferior in every respect, no one paid attention to the plight of our large population. In moments of testing patience, the powerful weapon of fraternity (*biradari*) ultimately served to protect the individual and collective interests of the poor and helpless Momin individuals. Therefore, these principles are very dear to us. It is evident that these issues make us distinct from other communities.

He warned the Momin community that “joining any of political parties, whether as individuals or collectively, will fragment the power of our united community into disparate labels.” Such an outcome, he continued, would render the Momins, as a community and fraternity, to “be annihilated” and revert their condition back to be “as weak and fragmented as it was before the launch of the Momin Movement.”⁶²

His imagination of “a distinct and separate Momin politics” was open to the possibilities of collaboration with sympathetic forces and supporting non-Momin artisan groups. It emphasized on the participation in “the genuine struggle for national freedom”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ansari, Presidential Address on 7 April 1939, District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur.

and recommended “total freedom” as the political outlook of the community. At the macro level, he envisaged “the independence of the country” as the solution to all problems.⁶³

Challenges to the Momins’ quest for political autonomy

Efforts at creating a political community out of the Momin population, with an emphasis on its distinct socio-historical location—serving as the justification for building an autonomous Momin politics—drew criticism from various quarters, such as the Momin entrepreneurs, the AIML, and the ulama. A group of Momin capitalists (*sarmayadar Momin tabqa*), was one such source of criticism; it was close to the AIML. Ansari termed these capitalists as “community traitors” (*jamatkeghaddaron*) because forces hostile to Momin politics were using them as instruments of subversion of the transformative promise of Momin politics.⁶⁴

However, the AIML, the most formidable opponent, mounted a multi-layered criticism and ran sustained campaigns against the AIMC. The League leaders viewed the AIMC’s awareness campaign of the ideals of Islamic equality unfavourably. They presented it as “a component of the mass contact strategy of the Congress”⁶⁵ so that the Muslim public’s displeasure of the Congress’ short comings, could be shifted away from it (the Congress) and channelized toward the AIMC to harm Momin movement and politics. They consider it a “threat to their position.” Since they belonged to “the class of capitalists, elite, and landowners” (*sab sarmayadar, amir aur zamindar tabqe*), they would never tolerate that the Momin community, “having progressed and attained high status, could deal a blow to their hegemony over wealth and leadership (*sarmaya waimara tkeiqtedar ko dhakka lagaye*).”⁶⁶

The political murder of Abdullah Ansari, a Momin volunteer, whom the AIML political workers assassinated in Kanpur, perhaps in the early 1939 makes A.Q. Ansari compare the threats to the lives of the Momin political workers with “living under the shadow of a double-edged sword in our homeland” (*Ham apnewatan me ek dodharitalwarkesaye me zindagibasarkarrahe hain*).⁶⁷ Here, the capitalist class among the Momins and the AIML constituted two sides of the “double-edged sword” because they were opposed to the efforts toward building an autonomous Momin politics.

The Momin leadership engaged with various issues the Ashraf critics raised in their critiques of the Momin politics and movement. The dialectic that emerged from the Muslim League critiques and their Momin counterarguments constitute important part of the Momin

⁶³ Ansari, Presidential Address on 7 April 1939, District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur.

⁶⁴ Ansari, Presidential Address on 7 April 1939, District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur.

⁶⁵ See for details: Hasan, Mushirul, “The Muslim Mass Contact Campaign: An Attempt at Political Mobilisation.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 (52), 1986: 2273-2275+2277-2282.; Dhulipala, Venka, “Muslim Mass Contacts and the Rise of the Muslim League.” In *Creating a New Medina*, 49–119 (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁶⁶ Ansari, Presidential address on 26 May 1939 at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

⁶⁷ Ansari, Abdul Qaiyum, *Presidential Address on 7 April 1939 at Ghazipur* (Ghazipur: District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur, 1939). Reports published in *The Searchlight*, a Patna-based newspaper, suggest that such incidents and sites of contestations between the political workers of AIMC and AIML were frequent in the 1940s. Also see: Sajjad, Mohammad, *Muslim Politics in Bihar: Changing Contours* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 200-201.

discourse. Further, they demonstrate what distinguishes the Ashraf Muslim discourse from the subaltern Muslim discourse. For ease of understanding, let us organize Muslim League's critiques of the Momin politics and the corresponding response from the Momin ideologues into two clusters.

CLUSTER NO. 1

Ashraf Critique:

The Momin politics was detrimental to Islamic unity and Muslim solidarity. It intended to sow discord among Muslims, leading to weakening their strength and jeopardizing Islam.

The Momin Counterargument:

“Among the nine crore Indian Muslims, more than four crore are helpless, destitute, and marginalized individuals. The [Momin] movement has been initiated for their progress, reform, and welfare.”⁶⁸ Further, “any movement that aims to alleviate the poverty of the needy and elevate them to a higher status is commendable in the eyes of Islam.”⁶⁹ It is sad that the Momin movement and politics “is being portrayed as detrimental to Islam and Muslims” in spite of the Momin leaders' clarifications on umpteen occasions. Then the question arises is why the Ashraf Muslim leaders and Muslim newspapers were against the Momin movement and the AIMC's participation in electoral politics. The answer is that a few rich Momins who usurped the rights of all impoverished Muslims for a long time, have been cunningly invoking Islam to justify their actions. “These usurper-capitalists repeatedly raise the cry of ‘Islam is in danger’ (*Islam khatre me hai*) to protect their privileges acquired by usurping others' rights”⁷⁰ and continue their exploitation day and night.

CLUSTER NO 2

Ashraf Critique:

The AIML as the Muslim mainstream/majority vis-à-vis the AIMC as the Momin peripheral/fringe and individualistic.

The AIML used the language of the mainstream community vis-à-vis peripheral/fringe and individualistic community, speaking against the mobilization of the Momin population into a political community. The AIML forbade the AIMC to participate in political matters and that it should run a separate political party as it believed it was the sole Muslim organization to represent the “great majority” (*sawad-e azam*) and a community (*jamaat*); everyone should gather under its banner (*is waqtyahi ek Muslim edarahaijis par haqiqimaana me “sawad-e azam” aur “jamat” ka itlaqho saktahai*)⁷¹

The Momin Counterargument:

The Momin discourse problematized the AIML's attempts to categorise itself as the Muslim mainstream and the AIMC as the non-mainstream political outfit. It criticized the tendency among the “Ashraf political hegemons” to use the concept of the “great majority” (*sawad-e azam*) into “a prop for their magic tricks and a tool to deceive the poor people.”

⁶⁸ Ansari, A. Q., Presidential address on 26 May 1939 at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

⁶⁹ Ansari, A. Q., *Presidential Address on 7 April 1939 at Ghazipur* (Ghazipur: District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur, 1939).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ansari, Presidential address on 26 May 1939 at Kagnara, in Chaubis Pargana.

⁷²In fact, the concept (the “great majority”) has become an empty signifier, it is not well-defined, and its content was put to various changes over decades to serve the parochial interests of the Ashraf political hegemony. These hegemony used the “great majority” concept to signify the Khilafat Conference, then the religious organisations and their gatherings, then All India Muslim Conference, and now the AIML. Thus, the Momin discourse contested the AIML’s self-description as the “great majority” (*sawad-e azam*). It asserted that the AIMC is the “great majority” because under its banner, barring a few individuals, “nearly forty million members of the Momin community have gathered.”

Furthermore, the AIMC was open to work with “other poor Muslim occupational communities” and hoped that they would “unite in action with the Momin community.”⁷³ Hence, the Momin discourse claimed that the poor communities under the banner of the AIMC would represent the true “*sawad-e azam*” and deserve to be designated as “the rightful owners of Muslim politics.” Though the slogans that criticized Momin politics (such as “*sawad-e azam*”, “Islam is in danger,” and “Hold firmly to the rope of Allah”) were couched in religious idioms, their true purpose was to consolidate the hold of the rich and landed class on the Muslim power. Moreover, the Ashraf political hegemony who raised these slogans, have been “separate and detached from ‘*sawad-e azam*’ of Islam.” The purpose behind these religious slogans was “to consolidate their leadership power and to manipulate us poor Muslims for their own benefit.”

A joint political platform of Momin and non-Momin occupational castes

The Momin discourse argues that the acquisition of the political power is among the needs of the Momin community (*jamaati zaruriyat kemotabiq*).⁷⁴ *Nikaat-e Mominin*, or six political demands of the Momin community, are A.Q. Ansari’s contribution to the Momin discourse and politics, in which he formulated political rights of the community. Then, he framed a sixteen-point actionable programme to achieve these political rights by translating *Nikaat-e Mominin* into practice.⁷⁵ The last entry in the list of sixteen points reads: “Efforts should be made to bring together all other Muslim occupational communities on a single platform along with the Momin community, and to announce that Jamiatul Mominin is fully prepared to assist these communities in obtaining and protecting their rights.”⁷⁶

By 1939, the scope of the political programme of Momin Conference evolved to be inclusive of organising other Muslim occupational communities (*dosari Muslim peshawarjamaaton ki tanzim*) for political action and mobilization because there were some among them whose condition was “even worse than that of the Momin community.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, the Qureshi, Mansoori, Rayeen, Idrisi, and Hawari communities suffered from

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ansari, *Presidential Address on 7 April 1939 at Ghazipur* (Ghazipur: District Jamiatul Ansar, Ghazipur, 1939).

⁷⁵ Ansari, Abdul Qaiyum, *Presidential Address Entitled ‘Nikaat-e Mominin Yani Momin Jamaat Ke Chhe Buniyadi Motabat’*, Delivered on 25 June 1938, Darbhanga: Darbhanga District Jamiatul Ansar Conference.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ansari, *Presidential Address on 7 April 1939 at Ghazipur* (Ghazipur: District Jamiatul Ansar Ghazipur, 1939).

the decline and degradation as much as the Momin community. Hence, A.Q. Ansari conceptualized it as the “duty” of the Momin community that it should work hard and participate in endeavours toward “the awakening of all Muslim occupational communities.” The purpose of this capacity-building collaboration was to float “a united front against capitalist leadership” (*sarmayadaraqeyadatkekhilaf ek muttahidamahaz*).⁷⁸ Hence, the Momin leadership considered the early signs of the political awakening among these communities “encouraging.” He further said:

I hope that these and other Muslim occupational communities will soon come together, and then we, along with them, will be able to not only eradicate capitalism (*sarmayadari ka qala qama*) through a unified platform but also take the leadership of the Muslim majority (*Muslim aksariyat ki zamam-e qeyadat*) in the country into our own hands.⁷⁹

In fact, A.Q. Ansari considered that the success of the agitation for the fulfilment of political demands was contingent upon the formation of a united front of Muslim occupational communities and presentation of the complete demands of all of them together. “In my opinion, this will lead to extremely beneficial results.”⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

The broader Momin discourse and the AIMC’s politics must be situated at the intersection of colonial political economy, Muslim social hierarchies, and emergent nationalist imaginaries. This paper has demonstrated that the AIMC articulated a subaltern Muslim politics that simultaneously contested the hegemonic claims of the Ashraf Muslims and the homogenizing frameworks of both the INC and the AIML. Its political vocabulary—rooted in egalitarian readings of textual Islam, an insistence on dignity, and the demand for proportional representation—signified a novel intervention in the field of Muslim political imagination in late colonial India.

Rather than being reducible to a caste-based assertion, the Momin movement sought to democratize the Muslim power structure and Muslim public sphere by foregrounding the occupational and artisan communities’ shared experiences of colonial deindustrialization and intra-Muslim exclusion. In doing so, it circumvented the dominant binaries of “Muslim unity” versus “division,” exposing how invocations of communitarian solidarity often functioned as strategies for reproducing elite control over political agency and economic resources. The AIMC’s critique of Ashraf hegemony, coupled with its efforts to forge solidarities with other Muslim occupational groups, anticipated later articulations of Pasmanda politics in postcolonial India.

From the vantage point of historiography, the Momin discourse complicates conventional narratives of Indian nationalism that privilege the League-Congress binary. It moves beyond the discursive trappings of the mega-events in 1857 and 1947 and sidesteps

⁷⁸ Ibid. This claim needs to be verified. Due to a dearth of material, I could not access the relevant details of such sessions required to verify his claims.

⁷⁹ Ansari, *Presidential Address on 7 April 1939 at Ghazipur* (Ghazipur: District Jamiatul Ansar Ghazipur, 1939).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

causal and correlational limitations of circular arguments made in terms of the master categories of *qaum*, *millat*, *ummat*.⁸¹ The Momin discourse reveals that alternative projects of Muslim political community—grounded in caste, class, and occupation—were integral to the democratic ferment in late colonial India. The discursive tropes that leaders such as A.Q. Ansari deployed underscore the need to rethink Muslim political subjectivity beyond elite-driven frameworks, situating it instead within the subaltern Muslims’s lived experiences.

In contemporary times, the Momin experience acquires renewed salience for debates on inclusive citizenship and the Pasmada question. Its historical legacy underscores the necessity of acknowledging subaltern Muslim voices in the making of Indian nationalism. By recovering these voices, the paper contests elite-centric historiographies, in addition to foregrounding the enduring relevance of egalitarian, justice-oriented visions of politics that continue to resonate in the struggles of marginalized communities in “New India.”

That the paper introduces A.Q. Ansari’s thoughts, in his own words, to the scholarly community is one of its contributions. It accesses his unmediated voice by drawing on his speeches and writings, not found among the colonial records and archives. This study has limitations, just like any other, the most important one being that it uses a small number of sources. Future research may try to pluralize the sources on the Momin discourse and the AIMC. Further, future studies may discover and present the thoughts of Momin leaders, other than A.Q. Ansari, to enrich this discussion on Momin discourse and subaltern Muslim nationalism.

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⁸¹ See for example: Qasmi, Ali Usman, and Megan Eaton Robb, “Introduction: Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of Pakistan.” In *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of Pakistan*, edited by Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb, 1–34, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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APPENDIX: Bio-sketch of Prominent Momin Leaders

1. Abdul Qaiyum Ansari

Abdul Qaiyum Ansari (1 July 1905–18 January 1973) was a politician associated with All India Momin Conference and Indian National Congress. Educated at Aligarh Muslim University, Ansari took part in the students' agitation against the Simon Commission during its visit to Calcutta in 1928. He brought out two magazines, namely the Urdu weekly *Al-Islah* (The Reform) and the Urdu monthly *Masawat* (Equality). In 1937, he joined All India Momin Conference which was active among Momins (lower caste artisan and weavers Muslims) to bring about social reforms and create awareness on the issues related to Ashraf-hegemony, British imperialism and non-Islamic nature of Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. After his party All India Momin Conference won six seats in the Bihar Provincial Assembly against the Muslim League in the general elections of 1946, he became a Minister

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in the cabinet of Sri Krishna Singh in Bihar. He was a Minister in the Bihar Cabinet for about seventeen years from 1946 to 1972 and held various portfolios. He was elected to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1946, 1962 and 1967 but lost the election in 1952 and 1957. He was the president of Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee between 1959 and 1962. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1970 but resigned in 1972.
