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An ‘Unusual’ Freedom Fighter: Raja Mahendra Pratap, Communal Harmony and His Relationship with Congress and Muslim Organisations

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Abstract

Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh occupies a somewhat marginal yet distinctive place in the history of India's freedom struggle. Born into a royal Jat family of the Mursan estate in present-day Hathras (Uttar Pradesh), he chose not the path of comfortable collaboration with the colonial state, but that of radical opposition and prolonged exile. His role in the establishment of the Provisional Government of India in Kabul during the First World War, his extensive travels across Asia and Europe to mobilise support against the British Empire, and his later engagements within independent India together make him an ‘unusual’ freedom fighter who never fitted neatly into the standard categories of nationalist politics.

Equally significant is his strong ethical commitment to communal harmony, articulated in both his public life and his writings, where he often emphasised the idea of “Prem-Dharam” or religion of love as the basis of social relations between communities. His complex and shifting relationship with the Indian National Congress, as well as his deep engagement with Muslim organisations and leaders, further underscore his belief in a plural, inclusive and dialogic nationalism. This article revisits Raja Mahendra Pratap's political journey through three interlinked entry points—his unconventional revolutionary trajectory, his ethic of communal harmony, and his relationship with Congress and Muslim organisations—to argue that he represents a strand of Indian nationalism that was simultaneously radical, transnational and profoundly secular in its orientation.

Keywords

Raja Mahendra Pratap; communal harmony; Indian National Congress; Muslim organisations; Indian freedom struggle; secular nationalism

Introduction

In much of mainstream historiography on the Indian national movement, Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh appears only in passing, usually in connection with the Provisional Government of India at Kabul or as a colourful eccentric attached to revolutionary politics. (1) Yet a closer engagement with his life and work reveals a far more layered political personality. He was a freedom fighter, revolutionary, educationist, writer and social reformer who spoke multiple languages and experimented with different religious and philosophical traditions. (2)

His decision to convert his own residence in Vrindavan into a technical institution—Prem Mahavidyalaya—in 1909, widely regarded as one of the earliest polytechnic schools in the country, already indicates an early commitment to social reform and practical education. (3) At the same time, his participation in international events such as the Balkan War of 1911, his

association with movements outside India including Gandhi's South Africa campaign, and his travels during and after the First World War, all point to a vision of anti-colonial politics that was framed in global rather than merely territorial terms. (4)

However, this unconventional trajectory also meant that his relationship with the principal institutional vehicle of Indian nationalism, the Indian National Congress, remained complex, often marked by both collaboration and critical distance. (5) Parallel to this, he cultivated enduring links with Muslim individuals and institutions—ranging from his educational bonding at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later AMU) to his alliances with Muslim revolutionaries and intellectuals in exile—which shaped his understanding of communal harmony as a political ethic rather than a mere expedient slogan. (6)

The present article is organised into four sections. The first explores the making of Raja Mahendra Pratap as a 'royal revolutionary'. The second examines his ideas and practices concerning communal harmony. The third analyses his relationship with the Indian National Congress. The fourth focuses on his engagement with Muslim organisations and leaders, before concluding with a brief reflection on his place within the broader landscape of Indian nationalism. (7)

1. A Royal Revolutionary: The Making of an 'Unusual' Freedom Fighter

Raja Mahendra Pratap was born in 1886 into the ruling family of Mursan, a small Jat principality, at a time when many princely and landed elites were gradually drawing closer to colonial power for reasons of security and prestige. (8) From an early age, however, he displayed a marked tendency to question authority and identify with the grievances of the colonised. His education at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh exposed him not only to English and modern sciences, but also to a cosmopolitan milieu in which Hindu and Muslim students could share a common institutional and intellectual space. (9)

Unlike many of his contemporaries from royal or landed backgrounds who opted for cautious constitutionalism or loyalism, Mahendra Pratap gravitated towards radical politics. He actively engaged with the Swadeshi movement, supported small indigenous industries, and is recorded to have encouraged the burning of foreign cloth in his state, drawing inspiration from nationalist leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. (10) The decision to part with his own property in order to establish Prem Mahavidyalaya further symbolised his departure from the conventional role of a princely landlord towards that of a social reformer committed to technical education and self-reliance. (11)

The defining moment of his revolutionary career, however, came with the formation of the Provisional Government of India in Kabul in 1915, during the First World War. There, he proclaimed himself President and appointed Maulana Barkatullah of Bhopal as Prime Minister, symbolically bringing together Hindu and Muslim revolutionaries under a common banner of anti-colonial struggle. (12) From Afghanistan he travelled widely—to Russia, Japan, and various parts of Europe—seeking support for India's independence and attempting to link the Indian cause with broader currents of anti-imperialist and socialist movements. (13)

This combination of royal pedigree, radical politics, transnational networking and prolonged exile made him a deeply unconventional figure in the Indian freedom movement. He did not belong squarely to the mainstream Congress tradition, the purely underground revolutionary tradition, or the later socialist formations, though he interacted with all of them at different points in time. (14) In this sense, the label ‘unusual freedom fighter’ is not a rhetorical flourish but an analytical descriptor of a political life that consistently refused to be confined by institutional or ideological boundaries. (15)

2. Communal Harmony as Political Ethic

If the Kabul episode and his travels reveal the transnational dimension of Mahendra Pratap’s politics, his writings and public statements draw attention to an equally important ethical dimension: the centrality of communal harmony. In a period when colonial policies of separate electorates and communal representation were sharpening religious identities, he sought to cultivate what he termed “Prem-Dharam”, an ethical-spiritual principle that placed love, mutual respect and solidarity above sectarian affiliations. (16)

His long association with Muslim friends and colleagues—from his student days at Aligarh to his collaboration with Muslim revolutionaries in exile—convinced him that Hindu–Muslim unity was not merely a tactical necessity to fight the British, but a foundational requirement for a just and stable Indian society. He repeatedly warned that a nationalism built on the domination or exclusion of any religious community would ultimately weaken the struggle against colonialism and even provide legitimacy to imperial narratives about the allegedly “divided” nature of Indian society.

Mahendra Pratap’s emphasis on communal harmony was not confined to abstract moral exhortation. He supported educational and social initiatives that brought people of different communities together and was known to participate in joint gatherings where Hindu and Muslim leaders addressed shared concerns. His own life, straddling different religious influences and intellectual currents, exemplified the possibility of a composite, non-sectarian identity, rooted in Indian traditions yet open to global humanist ideas.

In this way, communal harmony for him functioned as a political ethic: it framed how alliances were to be built, how disagreements were to be managed, and how a future India should be imagined. It is precisely this ethical orientation that illuminates his nuanced relationship with both the Congress and various Muslim organisations.

3. Relationship with the Indian National Congress

Mahendra Pratap’s relationship with the Indian National Congress was at once cooperative and critical. During certain phases, particularly after his return to India a year before independence, he worked with Gandhi and supported Congress programmes, recognising the party’s central role in mobilising the masses. At other times, especially in the inter-war years, he expressed dissatisfaction with what he perceived as Congress’s excessive reliance on constitutional negotiations and limited concessions offered by the colonial state.

From his vantage point as a revolutionary who had declared an independent Provisional Government on foreign soil, the strategy of accepting incremental reforms appeared inadequate

and potentially compromising. Yet he did not entirely dismiss Congress; rather, he regarded it as one, though not the only, vehicle of national awakening. His criticism was directed more at certain tendencies within the organisation—its elite composition, its internal factionalism, and its occasional hesitation to take uncompromising stands against communalism—than at the goal of national independence itself.

In the post-independence period, his political choices further underlined this independence of judgement. He entered the Lok Sabha in 1957 as an Independent candidate from Mathura, defeating Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, thereby signalling his refusal to be bound by any single party's ideological framework. (19) His subsequent advocacy of panchayati raj and decentralisation of power was based on a deep suspicion of centralised authority—whether colonial or post-colonial—and a conviction that genuine democracy must begin from the village level.

Thus, Mahendra Pratap's engagement with Congress cannot be described simply in terms of “inside” or “outside”. He remained an autonomous actor who could cooperate with Congress when it aligned with his ethical and political priorities, but who also retained the right to critique and distance himself whenever he felt that those priorities were being compromised.

4. Engagement with Muslim Organisations and Leaders

Mahendra Pratap's relationship with Muslim organisations and leaders must be situated within both his educational background and his political journey. As a student of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, he was part of an institution that actively fostered a modernist Muslim intelligentsia even as it attracted Hindu students who were open to living and learning in a largely Muslim environment. This early experience of an inter-communal campus life arguably shaped his comfort with, and respect for, Muslim culture and leadership.

His later decision to associate with Muslim revolutionaries—most notably Maulana Barkatullah in the Kabul Provisional Government—was more than a tactical alliance. It reflected a belief that Hindus and Muslims shared not only a common enemy in the British Empire, but also a common stake in building an India where both communities would enjoy equal dignity and rights. In this sense, his collaboration with Muslim leaders was simultaneously anti-colonial and anti-communal. (17)

In independent India, debates around his legacy frequently resurfaced in connection with the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), an institution with which he retained an emotional bond as a former student and benefactor. Historians at AMU have underlined that his commitment to a secular, democratic India was comparable to that of the tallest Congress leaders, and that his image as a bridge figure between communities deserves greater public recognition. At the same time, political controversies over portraits and commemorations in AMU also reveal how his symbolic capital has been contested in present-day identity politics.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish these contemporary appropriations from his own historical practice. For Mahendra Pratap, engagement with Muslim organisations was not a matter of short-term political gains but a long-term moral and political investment in a composite nationalism. His consistent insistence that Muslims must feel secure and respected in a free

India, and that any form of majoritarian nationalism would be self-defeating, marks him out as a distinctive voice within the wider freedom movement. (18)

5. Conclusion: Re-reading an ‘Unusual’ Nationalist

Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh’s life compels us to broaden our understanding of Indian nationalism beyond the familiar binaries of moderate versus extremist, constitutionalist versus revolutionary, or Congress versus non-Congress. He was at once a royal and a revolutionary, a global traveller and a rooted educationist, a critic and collaborator of Congress, and a steadfast advocate of communal harmony who worked closely with Muslim individuals and organisations. (19)

To read him merely as the “President of the Kabul Provisional Government” or as an eccentric aristocrat in exile is to miss the deeper coherence of his political ethic. That ethic combined a radical opposition to imperialism with an equally radical defence of pluralism and inter-communal solidarity. In many ways, his vision anticipated later debates on secularism, decentralisation and global justice in India’s political discourse. (20)

At a time when historical figures are often selectively invoked to serve narrow partisan agendas, a careful re-engagement with Mahendra Pratap’s life and writings can offer a more nuanced and inclusive perspective on the freedom struggle. His insistence that no nationalism can be genuine if it marginalises any community remains a powerful reminder that the unfinished task of building a just, democratic and plural India cannot be separated from the ethical commitments embedded in its anti-colonial past.

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