

International Conference on Understanding the Trajectories of Contemporary Islam

On the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata organized an international conference on *Understanding the Trajectories of Contemporary Islam* during 12-13 November 2013. The deliberations over two days ranged from issues as wide as Islam in transition and as specific as Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah who have emerged as a potent force in respective situations. Eminent international scholars and experts on the subject from across the socio-political and regional spectrum presented their papers, exchanged ideas and discussed the situation facing Muslim societies with respect to their Islam and Islamic movements.

In his inaugural address, historian and scholar on Islam and Muslims in Indian Professor Mushirul Hasan highlighted the plurality within Islam encompassing epistemological and ontological variations. It was argued that historically numerous interpretations have coexisted within the broader umbrella of Islam and that the contemporary trend to enforce a singular interpretation globally misrepresents Islamic ethos of plurality and tolerance. He further reasoned that a large number of problems facing the Arab-Muslim world are due to lack of resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has lingered in the psyche of Muslims across the globe.

The first academic session on *Contemporary Islam in Transition* started with Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Avraham Sela's presentation on "From Resistance to Governance: Institutionalisation and Change of Islamic Movements". He took up the cases of Hamas and Hezbollah movements which had started as resistance movements but gradually became part of the political process in the Palestinian Territory and Lebanon respectively. He argued that though the two movements charted their own path for this evolution but followed a similar trajectory in their flexible attitude towards issues pertaining to their constituencies. On the other hand Sean Foley, Associate Professor at the Middle Tennessee State University, focussed on the transformation which contemporary Saudi Arabia is experiencing through a process of *tajdid* and *islah* led by the rulers. During the presentation titled "Legitimising Transformation without calling it Change: Tajdid, Islah and Saudi Arabia's Place in the Contemporary World", he highlighted the contrasting realities existing in Saudi Arabia through pictorial representation underlining the current of transition visible in the Kingdom. The presentations were followed by discussion on various issues including the rise of radical Islamic movements and problem of extremist ideologies facing Saudi Arabia.

Three papers scheduled in the next session on *Transformation from Within* included "Nonviolence in Islam: The Message of Abul Kalam Azad" by Professor Hayat Alvi from the US Naval War College, "Islamic Modernism and Saudi Arabia: Confluence or Conflict?" by Jawaharlal Nehru University doctoral candidate Md. Muddassir Quamar and "Ennahda Movement in Power: A Missed Opportunity" by independent Tunisian journalist Farida Ayari. Hayat Alvi while speaking through Skype highlighted the importance of nonviolence in Islamic thought as has been propagated by Maulana Azad arguing that fight with self for

internal purity is a greater *jihad* and not the violent *jihad* being waged by the extremists which is theologically less important and is allowed only for defence. The paper on Saudi Arabia argued on the possibilities of confluence between contemporary Saudi Arabia and Islamic modernist thought despite numerous differences and thus can provide a tool to analyse the process of transition going on in Saudi Arabia. Farida Ayari on the other hand argued that the Ennahda that came to power after the fall of Ben Ali government has failed to deliver on its promises and is drifting towards authoritarian behaviour when it comes to individual liberty, women's rights and freedom of press. She opined that Tunisia is going through a complex situation whereby the ruling Islamists are focussing on weakening the opposition rather than building the economy and providing employment to the youth. A stimulating discussion on variety of issues from Islamic thought to Saudi Arabia and Tunisia followed with a number of participation from the audience.

On 13 November, six papers were presented in two sessions titled *Transcending Mosaic* and *Differing Discourses*. While Professor Hussein Solomon from the University of Free State, South Africa spoke on "Political Islam: An African Perspective", Professor Samina Yasmeen of the University of Western Australia presented her paper via Skype on "Muslim Identities in Australia". Professor Imtiaz Ahmed from University of Dhaka shared his views on "Arab Awakening and Its Impact on Bangladesh". Moreover the case of Indonesian experiment with Islam and democracy came up for detailed discussion during Ali Munhanif's presentation on "Negotiating Secularism in Egypt and Indonesia: Islamic, Institutions, and the Future of Secular Democracy". Professor Sherifa Zuhur from the US spoke on "The Syrian Opposition: Salafi and Nationalist Jihadism and Populist Idealism" highlighting the dangers posed by extremist tendencies within Islam and nationalist discourses while focussing on the Syrian case that has descended into a bloody civil-war after the chain protests and demonstrations in the Arab world during 2011-12. Professor AK Ramakrishnan from New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University emphasised on the tradition of democratic discourses within Islamic movements and their emergence as the leading force in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. He further highlighted the presence of plurality of thought and processes in Islam as well as emerging discourses on Islam and democracy during his presentation titled "Islam and Discourses of Democracy in the Context of the Arab Uprising". The two sessions also witnessed discussions and debates on various issues pertaining to contemporary debates and complex issues facing Islam and Muslim societies across the globe.

A symposium on *Contextualizing Maulana Azad for Understanding Contemporary Islam* was organised during the post-lunch session whereby Rafique Anwar from MAKAIAS presented his paper on "Islam in Transition" while Professor Hussein Solomon from South Africa and Dipanwita Chakravorty, Manjari Singh and Paulami Sanyal doctoral candidates at Jawaharlal Nehru University presented their thoughts Azad's ideas on Islam that evolved through his participation in the Indian freedom struggle and its relevance for contemporary Muslim societies particularly in the Middle East. The session was marked with a stimulating discussion on Islam and the Middle East attracting comments and questions from the audience and responses from the panellists.

Rajya Sabha MP Shri Ahmad Saeed Malehabadi in his Valedictory address while speaking in Hindustani (terming it the language of Azad and India's freedom struggle) recalled his brief but inspiring association with Maulana Azad and the relevance of his thought for Indian

Muslims in contemporary situations. He asserted Azad's unflinching stand against partition of India because of his belief in possibility of coexistence with other religions according to Islamic theology. He argued that Azad was a great scholar with a vision for a plural and united India but was failed by the circumstances that led to the partition of the subcontinent. He congratulated the organisers for conducting such a seminar in commemoration of Azad birth anniversary and argued that his thought on Islam should be propagated beyond India.