

Khilafat Movement (1919–1924): Objectives, Leadership, Congress Role, Major Events, Impact on Muslims, and Contribution to the Pakistan Movement

Introduction

The **Khilafat Movement (1919–1924)** was one of the most significant mass political and religious movements in the history of British India. It emerged after the **First World War (1914–1918)** to protect the institution of the **Ottoman Caliphate (Khilafat)**, which was regarded by many Sunni Muslims as a symbol of Islamic unity. Indian Muslims feared that the victorious Allied Powers would dismantle the Ottoman Empire and abolish the authority of the Caliph. Led by prominent Muslim leaders and supported by the **Indian National Congress**, the movement sought to pressure the British Government into preserving the Caliphate. Although the movement ultimately failed after the abolition of the Caliphate in **1924**, it profoundly transformed Muslim political consciousness and indirectly strengthened the ideological foundations of the Pakistan Movement.

Historical Background

The Ottoman Sultan held the title of **Caliph (Khalifa)**, regarded by many Muslims as the spiritual leader of the Muslim world.

During the First World War:

- The Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary.
- Britain and its allies defeated the Ottoman Empire.
- The victorious powers planned to divide Ottoman territories.
- Indian Muslims feared the humiliation and dismemberment of the last major Muslim empire.

The **Treaty of Sèvres (1920)** intensified these fears by proposing severe territorial losses for the Ottoman Empire.

Objectives of the Khilafat Movement

The movement pursued both religious and political objectives.

1. Protection of the Ottoman Caliphate

The primary objective was to preserve the authority and dignity of the Ottoman Caliph as the spiritual leader of Sunni Muslims.

2. Protection of Ottoman Territories

The movement demanded that Muslim holy places and core Ottoman territories should remain under Muslim control.

3. Pressure on the British Government

Indian Muslims hoped to persuade Britain to adopt a fair peace settlement with Turkey.

4. Muslim Unity

The movement aimed to unite Muslims across India irrespective of regional or social differences.

5. Defence of Islamic Identity

Many Muslims regarded the defence of the Caliphate as a religious obligation and a means of protecting the prestige of Islam.

Major Leaders of the Khilafat Movement

Several distinguished leaders guided the movement.

Muslim Leaders

- **Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar**
- **Maulana Shaukat Ali**
- **Maulana Abul Kalam Azad**
- **Hakim Ajmal Khan**
- **Hasrat Mohani**
- **Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari**

These leaders organized meetings, publications, fundraising campaigns, and nationwide protests.

Role of Mahatma Gandhi

Although not a Muslim leader, **Mahatma Gandhi** strongly supported the movement.

He believed:

- Hindu-Muslim unity would strengthen the struggle against British rule.

- Cooperation between Congress and Muslim leadership would accelerate India's demand for self-government.

This cooperation resulted in the joint **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920)**.

Timeline of the Khilafat Movement

Year	Event
1918	End of the First World War
1919	Khilafat Committees established across India
November 1919	All-India Khilafat Conference held in Delhi
1920	Treaty of Sèvres imposed on Turkey
1920	Congress joins the Khilafat Movement through the Non-Cooperation Movement
1920–1921	Boycott of British institutions, schools, courts, and goods
1920–1921	Hijrat Movement to Afghanistan
1921	Moplah (Malabar) Rebellion
1922	Chauri Chaura Incident; Gandhi suspends Non-Cooperation Movement
1923	Mustafa Kemal's reforms weaken the Caliphate
3 March 1924	Turkish Grand National Assembly abolishes the Caliphate; Khilafat Movement ends

Major Incidents During the Khilafat Movement

1. Formation of Khilafat Committees

Committees were established throughout India to organize public meetings, collect funds, and mobilize support.

2. Non-Cooperation Movement (1920)

Congress and Khilafat leaders jointly launched the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Its programme included:

- Boycott of British schools.
- Boycott of law courts.

- Boycott of foreign goods.
- Resignation from government jobs.
- Refusal to accept British honours.

This became the first large-scale mass movement against British rule.

3. Hijrat Movement (1920)

Some Muslim scholars declared that British India had become **Dar-ul-Harb** (land of war).

Thousands of Muslims migrated to Afghanistan hoping to live under Muslim rule.

The migration proved disastrous because:

- Afghanistan refused to accommodate many migrants.
- Thousands suffered financial losses.
- Many returned disappointed.

4. Moplah Rebellion (1921)

Muslim peasants in Malabar (Kerala) revolted against Hindu landlords and British authorities.

Although rooted largely in agrarian grievances, the rebellion became associated with the Khilafat Movement.

The British suppressed it with considerable force.

5. Chauri Chaura Incident (1922)

Violence at Chauri Chaura resulted in the deaths of several policemen.

Believing that the movement had become violent, Gandhi immediately withdrew the Non-Cooperation Movement.

This decision disappointed many Khilafat leaders and weakened Hindu-Muslim cooperation.

Role of the Indian National Congress

Initially, Congress played a major role in supporting the movement.

Reasons for Congress Support

Congress believed:

- The movement would strengthen anti-British nationalism.
- Hindu-Muslim unity would increase political pressure on Britain.

- Joint mass mobilization could accelerate self-government.

Positive Contributions

Congress:

- Organized joint meetings.
- Encouraged boycotts.
- Supported Non-Cooperation.
- Promoted temporary Hindu-Muslim unity.

Decline of Cooperation

After Gandhi withdrew the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922:

- Muslim leaders felt betrayed.
- Confidence between Congress and Muslim leadership declined.
- Political cooperation weakened significantly.

Impact of the Khilafat Movement on Indian Muslims

The movement transformed Muslim politics in several ways.

1. Political Awakening

For the first time, millions of ordinary Muslims actively participated in mass politics.

2. Muslim Unity

The movement united Muslims across:

- Provinces.
- Languages.
- Social classes.
- Economic backgrounds.

3. Development of Political Leadership

The movement produced experienced Muslim political leaders capable of organizing nationwide campaigns.

4. Growth of Political Consciousness

Muslims increasingly recognized the importance of political organization for protecting their interests.

5. Decline of Trust in Congress

The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement and subsequent political disagreements weakened Muslim confidence in Congress leadership.

Why Did the Khilafat Movement End?

Several factors caused the movement's failure.

1. Abolition of the Caliphate (1924)

The decisive factor was **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's** abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate on **3 March 1924**.

Once the institution itself disappeared, the movement lost its central objective.

2. Turkish Nationalism

Mustafa Kemal prioritized secular Turkish nationalism over the traditional Caliphate.

His reforms fundamentally changed the political structure of Turkey.

3. Withdrawal of Congress Support

The suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement deprived the Khilafat Movement of its strongest political ally.

4. Internal Weaknesses

The movement lacked:

- Clear long-term political strategy.
- Organizational discipline.
- Unified leadership after 1922.

5. International Developments

The future of Turkey was ultimately determined by Turkish national leaders rather than Indian Muslim political activism.

Impact on the Pakistan Movement

Although the Khilafat Movement failed in its immediate objective, its long-term political consequences were highly significant.

1. Strengthened Muslim Political Identity

The movement reinforced the idea that Muslims possessed distinct political and religious interests requiring organized leadership.

2. Prepared Muslims for Mass Politics

Millions of Muslims gained experience in:

- Political organization.
- Public meetings.
- Constitutional demands.
- Nationwide mobilization.

This experience later benefited the Pakistan Movement.

3. Weakening of Hindu-Muslim Unity

The collapse of Congress-Muslim cooperation convinced many Muslim leaders that permanent political partnership with Congress was difficult.

4. Encouragement of Independent Muslim Politics

The movement strengthened the belief that Muslims required their own political organizations to safeguard their interests.

This greatly enhanced the importance of the **All-India Muslim League** during subsequent decades.

5. Contribution to the Two-Nation Theory

The movement emphasized the importance of Muslim identity, solidarity, and separate political interests.

These ideas later evolved into constitutional demands for Muslim autonomy and eventually the demand for Pakistan.

Critical Evaluation

The Khilafat Movement occupies a unique place in South Asian history. It was the first movement to mobilize Muslims across India on an unprecedented scale while simultaneously promoting temporary Hindu-Muslim cooperation through its alliance with the Congress. However, its objectives depended largely on international developments beyond India's control. The abolition of the Caliphate by Turkish nationalists, combined with the collapse of the Congress alliance, brought the movement to an end. Nevertheless, it permanently transformed Muslim political consciousness by demonstrating the power of organized mass politics and highlighting the necessity of safeguarding Muslim political interests independently.

Conclusion

The Khilafat Movement (1919–1924) was a landmark in the political history of Indian Muslims. Originating as a campaign to preserve the Ottoman Caliphate, it rapidly evolved into a mass political movement that united Muslims across British India and temporarily forged an alliance with the Indian National Congress. Although the movement ultimately failed due to the abolition of the Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the withdrawal of Congress support, its political consequences were far-reaching. It awakened Muslim political consciousness, produced experienced leaders, familiarized ordinary Muslims with mass political participation, and exposed the limitations of Hindu-Muslim political cooperation. These developments strengthened the demand for separate Muslim political representation and laid important ideological and organizational foundations for the Pakistan Movement. Thus, despite its immediate failure, the Khilafat Movement remains a crucial milestone in the constitutional and political evolution of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent.

