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The Role of Literature in the Pakistan Movement (1930–1947)

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ABSTRACT

From 1930 to 1947, Urdu and English literary cultures—poetry, prose, pamphleteering, and the press—functioned as engines of political imagination for the Pakistan Movement. Drawing on speeches, newspapers (e.g., Dawn), literary journals (Nigar, Adab-e-Latif), and the poetry of figures such as Muhammad Iqbal and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, this article argues that literature did not merely reflect nationalist aspirations; it actively produced them. Literary forms supplied symbols (millat, qaum, khudi), narrated grievances (minority safeguards, provincial inequities), and normalized new geographies (“Pakistan”) through repetition and circulation. Beyond elite platforms, mushairas, debating societies, and student periodicals translated elite discourse into popular idioms. We analyze five mechanisms—symbolic consolidation, media ecologies, counterpublics, vernacularization of constitutional debates, and affective mobilization—to explain how texts and performance genres converted dispersed sentiments into political organization. The article concludes that literature forged an emotional commons and a communicative infrastructure that made the 1940 Lahore Resolution imaginable and its eventual realization in 1947 thinkable.

Keywords:

Pakistan Movement, Urdu literature, political communication, Muhammad Iqbal, print culture, nationalism, Dawn newspaper, Lahore Resolution

INTRODUCTION

Between the Allahabad Address (1930) and independence (1947), literary production across North India accelerated and intertwined with Muslim political mobilization. Poetry anthologies, serialized novels, polemical pamphlets, and editorial columns converged to forge a vocabulary of destiny and difference. Iqbal's conceptual language—*khudi*, community, spiritual sovereignty—provided a metaphysical grammar, while pamphleteers like Choudhry Rahmat Ali offered cartographic slogans that re-situated territory through text.

Print capitalism amplified these messages. Lahore, Aligarh, Lucknow, and Delhi formed a dense network of presses and journals that shuttled ideas among students, clerics, lawyers, and traders. The emergence of *Dawn* (founded 1941) and the repurposing of earlier outlets (such as *Zamindar*) created channels where literary affect and political instruction cohabited. Poetry readings (mushairas) functioned as mass pedagogy, collapsing the distance between the page and the street.

Crucially, literature translated constitutional abstractions—federal safeguards, separate electorates—into legible narratives of collective security and moral purpose. The Lahore Resolution (1940) and subsequent negotiations lived simultaneously as legal drafts and as stylized stories and metaphors. By 1947, this communicative ecosystem had normalized the idea of Pakistan among diverse audiences.

Symbolic Consolidation: From Metaphor to Mandate

One of the most significant contributions of literature to the Pakistan Movement was its ability to translate abstract political demands into emotionally resonant symbols. Iqbal's poetic lexicon—particularly concepts like *khudi* (selfhood) and *millat* (community)—reframed sovereignty not merely as a constitutional arrangement but as a form of spiritual self-realization. These metaphors gave intellectual depth to the nationalist cause and positioned it within a broader civilizational discourse.

Similarly, slogans such as “*Now or Never*” (1933, Rahmat Ali) condensed territorial aspirations into memorable textual artifacts. Such concise literary forms played an indispensable role in shaping collective consciousness by reducing complex geopolitical arguments into portable and repeatable expressions.

Recurrent motifs—such as the homeland imagined as a sacred trust, or the future depicted as a promise of liberation—reinforced this shared imaginary. By continuously embedding these images in poems, pamphlets, and speeches, writers stabilized a moral narrative that extended beyond political elites to popular audiences. In this way, metaphor and repetition functioned as instruments of symbolic consolidation, transforming literary imagination into political mandate.

Media Ecologies: Newspapers, Journals, and Pamphlets

The growth of newspapers and literary journals during the 1930s and 1940s constituted a powerful media ecology that amplified the voices of the Pakistan Movement. Among these, *Dawn* emerged as a pan-Indian Muslim editorial hub, offering consistent political direction and rhetorical reinforcement for the Muslim League. Through its editorials and news coverage, *Dawn* provided not only political commentary but also a cultural framework in which daily events were woven into the larger narrative of Muslim nationhood.

Alongside this political press, literary journals such as *Nigar* and *Adab-e-Latif* mediated important crossovers between literature and politics. These journals nurtured a generation of writers who blurred the boundaries between aesthetic creation and ideological argument, thereby embedding political discourse within cultural production. In this way, the literary sphere lent legitimacy and moral force to political mobilization.

Pamphlets, broadsides, and locally printed booklets further extended the circulation of ideas. Cheap, portable, and easily reprinted, these media forms democratized access to nationalist discourse by reaching audiences in small towns, rural centers, and educational institutions far beyond the metropolitan hubs of Lahore, Delhi, and Lucknow. Their concise language and direct appeals made them especially effective in environments where literacy levels varied, ensuring that slogans and arguments could be easily read aloud, memorized, and repeated.

Editorials in newspapers and journals blended reportage with rhetorical flourish, turning news into a didactic instrument. Political developments such as the Round Table Conferences, the Lahore Resolution, or provincial elections were reframed as milestones on the path toward collective emancipation. This alignment of daily events with a narrative arc of nationhood allowed literature and journalism to function as interpretive guides, orienting Muslim publics toward the idea of Pakistan as both an imminent and inevitable reality.

Counterpublics and Performance

Beyond the printed page, the Pakistan Movement derived strength from performative spaces that transformed private reading into collective experience. Mushairas (poetic gatherings) were particularly vital in converting reading publics into listening publics. By bringing together poets, students, activists, and community members, these events multiplied the reach of literature far beyond its textual circulation. The collective recitation of verses in packed halls and open courtyards turned poetry into a shared emotional ritual, embedding political ideals within cultural practice.

Student societies also played a crucial role in creating counterpublics—alternative spheres of discussion and mobilization that paralleled formal politics. Through debates, declamation contests, and campus publications, these groups nurtured a politically conscious youth whose voices resonated in both urban centers and provincial towns. Such performances ensured that nationalist discourse was not confined to party platforms but diffused across educational and cultural institutions.

The emergence of women's columns in journals and the growing presence of letters to the editor expanded the inclusivity of this cultural-political sphere. By contributing perspectives on social reform, education, and political rights, women authors and correspondents articulated a civic voice that challenged gendered exclusions from mainstream politics. Their engagement broadened the imaginative horizon of the Pakistan Movement by embedding questions of identity and justice into everyday concerns.

Recitation styles, particularly *tarannum* (melodic chanting of poetry), heightened affective intensity and aided memorization. The rhythmic delivery of verses transformed poems into mnemonic devices, enabling rapid diffusion across communities regardless of literacy levels. These performances turned literary texts into living traditions, mobilizing audiences through sound, rhythm, and collective participation. In this way, counterpublics and performative practices reinforced the emotional legitimacy of the Pakistan idea and ensured its diffusion across diverse constituencies.

Vernacularizing Constitutionalism

One of the most powerful functions of literature in the Pakistan Movement was its ability to translate dense constitutional arguments into accessible narratives. Essays in journals and serialized fiction reframed technical debates—on representation, federal safeguards, or separate electorates—into stories of security, dignity, and rights that resonated with everyday readers. By embedding abstract proposals within plots and characters, authors humanized constitutional struggles, showing how political arrangements would affect families, communities, and livelihoods.

Debates over language policy further linked questions of culture to statecraft. The status of Urdu emerged not merely as a linguistic concern but as a symbolic marker of Muslim identity and political autonomy. Editorials, poems, and polemical essays argued for Urdu as the medium of cultural continuity and civic participation, thereby binding language to the very structure of the imagined state. The circulation of these arguments through both elite journals and popular pamphlets ensured that linguistic debates became inseparable from the larger political project of Pakistan.

Literary polemics functioned as a form of informal civic education. Ahead of major political events such as the Lahore Resolution (1940) or the provincial elections (1945–46), writers distilled complex constitutional proposals into digestible arguments, slogans, and allegories. Such polemical writing trained readers to interpret political developments as part of a broader struggle for rights and recognition. By the mid-1940s, the vernacularization of constitutionalism had produced a literate and semi-literate public well-versed in the vocabulary of self-determination, effectively preparing them to engage with the formal processes of negotiation and mobilization.

Affective Mobilization and Ethical Imagination

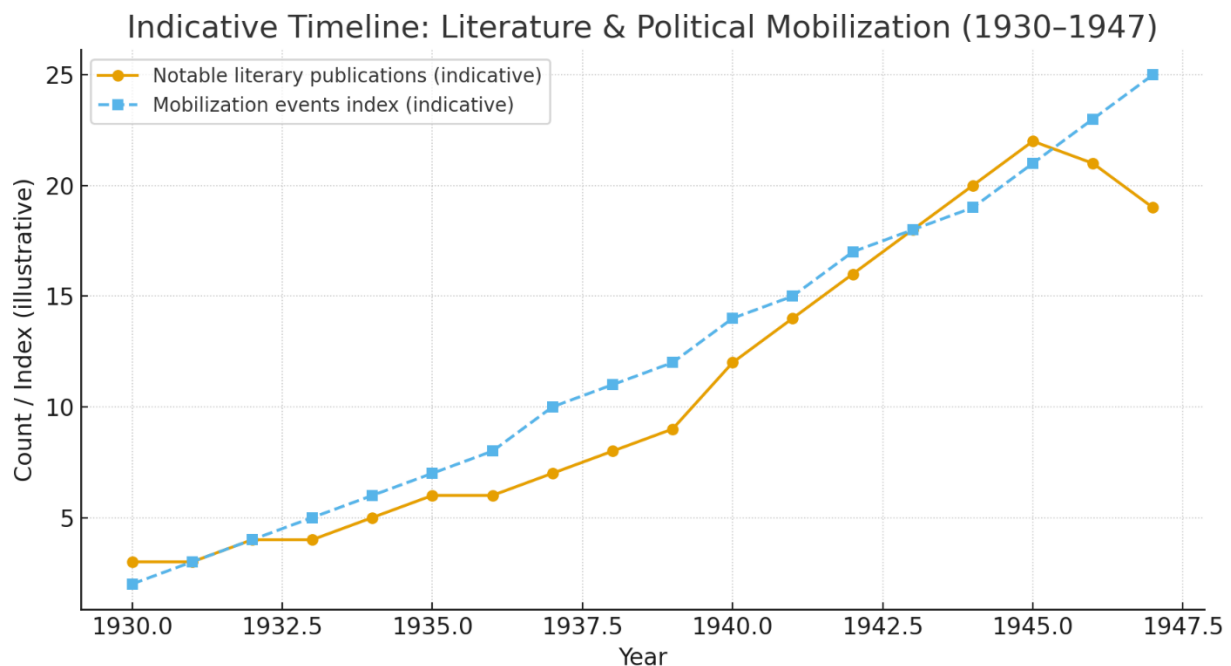
The Pakistan Movement was sustained not only by rational arguments and constitutional proposals but also by a powerful affective economy that literature helped to construct. Elegies, hymns, and commemorative verses created a moral framework of sacrifice and redemption, in which personal loss was reinterpreted as collective duty. The glorification of martyrs, students, and activists in verse gave political mobilization an ethical dimension, sanctifying participation in the nationalist struggle as both a civic and spiritual responsibility.

Satirical writing offered another literary tool for mobilization. By targeting bureaucratic exclusions, colonial administrators, and political adversaries, satire lowered the risks of dissent. Humor, parody, and irony allowed writers to voice criticism in ways that were accessible to broader publics while deflecting direct censorship. In doing so, satire performed a dual function: it exposed the absurdities of colonial governance and simultaneously strengthened communal bonds through shared laughter at oppression.

Equally significant were literary portrayals of refugees-in-waiting—figures caught between insecurity and aspiration. Short stories, serialized novels, and journalistic sketches often depicted Muslims as marginalized within a Hindu-majority polity, foreshadowing the humanitarian crises of 1947. These anticipatory narratives fostered empathy and urgency, preparing readers to interpret partition-era displacement not merely as a logistical challenge but as a moral imperative requiring solidarity, relief, and recognition.

Through these forms, literature provided the emotional scaffolding of the Pakistan Movement. By embedding sacrifice, satire, and suffering into the imaginative landscape, writers mobilized

affect as a political resource, ensuring that the idea of Pakistan resonated not only with the mind but also with the heart.



Summary

Literature in the Pakistan Movement operated as infrastructure as much as expression: it supplied a portable language of community, knit together dispersed publics, and habituated readers and listeners to new political geographies. Through symbols, media circuits, public performance, vernacular constitutionalism, and affective charge, texts and recitations prepared audiences for the Lahore Resolution (1940) and sustained momentum through 1947. The synergy between literary culture and political organization demonstrates how nations are not only negotiated in assemblies but imagined, rehearsed, and emotionally validated in poems, pamphlets, and the press.

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