


# Book Review | Madan Mohan Malaviya and the Indian Freedom Movement

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*Freedom fighter and educationist, Madan Mohan Malaviya is one of the least known figures from the Indian freedom movement. In a new book on his life, **Gayathri D Naik** finds a man who was a staunch supporter of press freedom and the power of education.*



**Madan Mohan Malaviya and the Indian Freedom Movement. Jagannath Prasad Misra. Oxford University Press. 2016**

Seventy years after gaining independence from British rule, memories of the freedom movement and the great personalities who devoted their lives persist as a point of interest for every Indian in any corner of the world. While the lives and contributions of many freedom fighters have been explored, discussed and catalogued by different scholars, several key leaders have been neglected by historians.

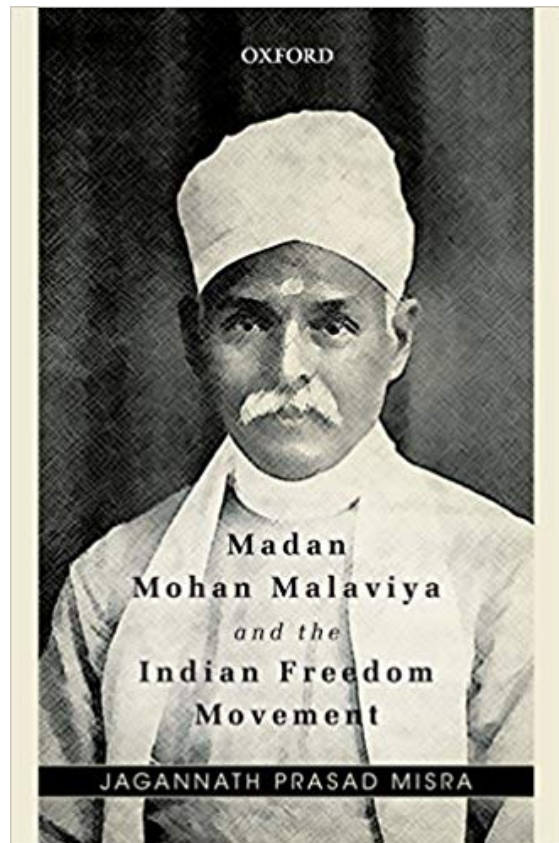
Professor Jagannath Prasad Misra (Banaras Hindu University) attempts to fill this gap with his book on freedom fighter and educationist, Madan Mohan Malaviya. His book, *Madan Mohan Malaviya and the Indian Freedom Movement* (2016) examines Malaviya's involvement in the Indian freedom movement, his relations with the Indian National Congress, its leaders, and other organisations. His relentless efforts to promote education and to foster Hindu-Muslim unity and fraternity are of special focus in this book.

Malaviya's participation in Indian nationalist politics through the Congress party was at a time when leaders of this pan-India association of western-educated and professional elite attempted to define Indian nationalism. Misra observes that Malaviya's early career in politics was influenced by the then prevalent idea of 'service to society' which implied 'service to country.' Born to a Brahmin family of Allahabad, his initial years in a traditional environment influenced his whole life. An ardent champion of socio-religious activities in Allahabad, through his involvement in Hindu Samaj, Malaviya, as observed by the author however was never a zealous campaigner of the cow-protection movement.

Spanning over eleven chapters, the book is more of a journey through the political life of Malaviya than a stale biography of his professional life, and the Congress party is the stage for this political life. Malaviya's relationship with Congress began with the second session of the INC and Misra studies his leadership in three phases. The first 1886-1919, the 'Moderate era' in Congress that saw the advent of extremist leaders and the consequent split in the party. Malaviya was at the zenith of his influence in Congress during this time, acting as a bridge between the two rival sections. The second is 1919-1928, known to be the onset of Gandhian politics, which set the foundation of non-violent, non-cooperation movement, by-passing the influence of Malaviya. And the third 1929-1937: this phase saw the waning of Malaviya's leadership, where he lost his influence in INC.

Malaviya began his relationship and association with politics and Congress, then dominated by western-educated, middle-aged professionals, at a very young age, an entry vividly described by the author as dramatic and distinctive. His relationship with the INC continued until he retired from active politics, despite his later engagement with Hindu Mahasabha and formation of his own party, the 'Nationalist Party'. While in Congress, he shared the then moderate leader's sentiments and assumption that rulers would respond positively towards India's requirement. Nevertheless, Malaviya, a staunch supporter of the British Raj, never missed an opportunity to express his indifference and scepticism over certain Government actions, such as provisions of the Indian Councils Act 1909, through which the Government tried to introduce race, religion and class representations in the Council. Malaviya remained throughout this life a strong proponent of religious unity and equality among all religions.

The role of Malaviya as an elected representative is lesser known and this book provides an insight into the seasoned parliamentary life of Malaviya, who vehemently opposed several draconian laws introduced by the Government, such as the Press Bill and Seditious



Meetings Bill. Malaviya, as pointed out by the author through a vivid illustration of his role in opposing restrictions on press, was a staunch supporter of press freedom.

The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920 was a landmark moment in the Indian freedom movement. It witnessed Gandhi as the new leader of the INC and a wider national movement. Malaviya was cynical about the form and type of Gandhi's strategy of non-cooperation however and abstained from participating, but maintained good relations with Gandhi and Congress. Later, during the civil disobedience movement and Dandi March, Malaviya expressed his trust in the Gandhian form of peaceful protest of the Raj. Through an illustration of a sequence of events, Misra has sharply described the relations between Mahatma and Malaviya.

Like his role as a parliamentarian, his participation in the Round Table Conference in London is less well-known. The end of his active political life began with mistrust and representations by his fellow compatriots to Congress Working Committee for initiating disciplinary actions because of his support for Congress rivals during provincial elections, especially in Punjab. A staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity, he proved his integrity and faith in religious unity in many instances of religious revolts in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

Along with a vivid narration of his contribution to politics, this book also highlights the role played by Malaviya in education, literature, and social activities – foremost his endeavour and struggle to establish a Hindu University at Benaras. Currently, the largest residential universities in South Asia, Banaras Hindu University is one of major higher education institutions in modern India. Misra also takes care to discuss Malaviya's role in promoting and succeeding Hindi as the language in Court and for revenue records.



*The spine of a book open in its middle | Credit: Unsplash, @jonasjacobsson*

The author laments that despite the positive role of Malaviya in the national freedom movement and throughout his life as a staunch proponent of religious unity, Malaviya was characterised and associated with religious fanaticism and communalism. He was often criticised by his contemporaries for a gruelling communal spirit among Hindus, despite many leaders like Gandhi and Nehru being against such unity. This book provides an insider view on Malviya's life and his contribution to India's freedom movement when the criticism of Malaviya being a communalist still prevails in modern India, although through his book Misra is successful at helping erase the negative historic claims of his fanaticism towards Indian higher education. Thoroughly researched and comprehensively written, this book is highly recommended to understand a great leader who is less remembered for his valuable service to India than he should be.

For his role in India's freedom struggle, Malaviya was bestowed with 'Bharat Ratna', the highest Civilian honour by the Government of India in 2014. It is right that Malaviya's contribution to the freedom movement is not forgotten. But it is also paramount, as this book emphasises, that the need to remember his advocacy for an understanding of religious doctrines that promotes unity is not forgotten either.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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