G.M. Syed and the Quest for a Sindhi Identity (1930–1995)

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Abstract

This essay investigates the role of Ghulam Murtaza Syed (G.M. Syed) in the conceptualization, formation, and defence of a distinct Sindhi ethno-national identity from 1930 to 1995. I propose that Syed was not merely a reactive political figure but the primary intellectual architect of modern Sindhi nationalism. His long career, which I trace from his early social reforms and involvement in the Pakistan Movement to his eventual advocacy for an independent 'Sindhudesh', represents a coherent intellectual and political journey. This journey was defined by a sixty-year struggle to define and defend a unique Sindhi identity—rooted in millennia-old cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions—against the successive hegemonies of British colonialism, pan-Indian nationalism, pan-Islamic identity, and, finally, the centralizing Pakistani state. I analyze his political manoeuvres, such as his pivotal role in passing the 1943 Pakistan Resolution in the Sindh Assembly, as actions predicated on a specific, maximalist interpretation of provincial autonomy. I further argue that his post-1947 disillusionment, particularly with the separation of Karachi and the One-Unit policy, was a predictable outcome of the fundamental clash between his vision of a multinational "Pakistan" and the state's drive toward a monolithic "Pakistani" identity. Finally, I examine his prolific literary contributions, particularly *Nation in Chains*, as the foundational texts of a secular-Sufi Sindhi nationalism that consciously positioned the Indus Valley civilization, not the arrival of Islam, as the basis of Sindhi nationhood. This work concludes that G.M. Syed successfully embedded a resilient and distinct ethno-national consciousness into Sindhi society, ensuring that the "Sindhi question" remains a central, unresolved dynamic in Pakistani politics.

Keywords: G.M. Syed, Sindhi Nationalism, Identity Politics, Pakistan, Ethno-Nationalism, State-Building, Sindhudesh.

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The twentieth-century decolonization of South Asia did not resolve the "national question"; it merely recast it. The exit of the British Raj bifurcated the subcontinent based on a pan-Islamic identity, but this "Two-Nation Theory" immediately collided with the older, deeper, and more resilient ethno-linguistic identities that comprised the new state of Pakistan. The subsequent history of Pakistan is one of a continuous, unresolved tension between a centralizing, Urdu-speaking, and Punjabi-dominated state apparatus and the persistent centrifugal nationalisms of its federating units. The tragic secession of Bangladesh in 1971 was the most violent manifestation of this clash, but the "problem" of ethno-nationalism in the western wing—in Balochistan, in the Pashtun lands, and most profoundly in Sindh—has remained a perennial feature of the state's political life.

Within this larger context, the case of Sindh is unique, and the career of Ghulam Murtaza Syed, or G.M. Syed, is its central text. No other individual so completely embodies the journey from a pre-partition "Muslim" nationalist to a post-partition "ethno-nationalist" dissident. I propose that G.M. Syed was not merely a political actor swept up by events but the central *intellectual architect* of modern Sindhi identity. He waged a conscious, sixty-year struggle to first define, then articulate, and finally defend this identity against colonial, religious, and centralized-statist hegemonies. His life's work was the meticulous construction of a "Sindhi" nationhood—one with its own history, language, cultural symbols, and political rights—that existed independently of, and often in opposition to, the "Pakistani" nationhood being constructed by the state.

I argue that Syed's political evolution was not contradictory but coherent. His early social reforms in the 1920s and 1930s were the seedbed of his identity politics, aimed at uplifting the Sindhi *Hari* (peasant) and preserving Sindhi culture. His support for the Pakistan Movement, I suggest, was entirely conditional. He championed the 1940 Lahore Resolution precisely because he interpreted its clause for "independent states" as a guarantee of complete autonomy for Sindh (Syed 1949, 92). His rapid break with Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League, therefore, was not a betrayal but a reaction to his belief that this "contract" of autonomy was being violated. I will trace how his post-partition resistance—against the separation of Karachi, the One-Unit policy, and the 1973 Constitution—was a consistent defense of this original autonomist vision. Finally, I propose that his post-1971 intellectual turn to "Sindhudesh" was not a new idea, but the logical culmination of his lifelong project: the codification of a secular, Sufi-based Sindhi nationalism, articulated most clearly in his prolific writings, which defined Sindhis as an ancient nation, not just a modern ethnic group.

The scholarly literature on G.M. Syed and Sindhi nationalism generally falls into two broad camps, with a third, more synthetic view emerging recently. The first camp, often reflecting a state-centric Pakistani narrative, has historically portrayed Syed as a feudal rejectionist, a "Wadero" (landlord) whose politics were driven by personal grievance and a parochial inability to integrate into the larger Pakistani project. This perspective interprets his rifts with Jinnah as personal power struggles and his later nationalism as a politically motivated "politics of ethnicity," undermining national unity. This view,

common in official histories, has lost academic traction but remains a powerful undercurrent in popular discourse. It informs the state's long-standing suspicion of eth-nationalist movements (Siddiqi 2012, 76). I find this perspective reductive, as it wilfully ignores the sophisticated intellectual and ideological content of Syed's work and dismisses his decades of imprisonment as mere stubbornness rather than ideological commitment.

The second, more dominant scholarly camp situates Syed and Sindhi nationalism within the broader framework of post-colonial state-building and identity politics. Christopher Jaffrelot (2015, 145–150) frames Sindhi nationalism as a direct response to the "ethnic engineering" of the Pakistani state, particularly the demographic changes wrought by the *Muhajir* influx and the political marginalization under the One-Unit system. Similarly, Sarah Ansari (2005, 88–92) provides a nuanced historical account, detailing how Syed's pre-partition identity politics, focused on separating Sindh from Bombay, mutated into a post-partition resistance movement as Sindhi interests were subsumed by the new central government. Adeel Khan (2005, 130–135) reinforces this, arguing that the "overdeveloped" bureaucratic-military state treated provinces like Sindh as internal colonies, making Syed's nationalist reaction almost inevitable. This body of work is foundational, providing the essential socio-political context for Syed's actions. I suggest, however, that this "reactionary" model, while correct, is incomplete. It risks portraying Syed as a purely *political* figure, responding only to external stimuli and state oppression. My research builds on this second camp but seeks to fill a gap by foregrounding Syed as an *intellectual* and *ideologue* in his own right. I argue that Syed was not just *reacting* to the Pakistani state; he was proactively *constructing* an alternative, a fully-fledged Sindhi nationhood, drawing from a deep well of cultural, historical, and philosophical sources. His politics were the *expression* of this pre-existing intellectual project, not its cause. My work, therefore, synthesizes the political analysis of Ansari (2005) and Khan (2005) with a deep textual analysis of Syed's own primary works—such as *Sindhu Ji Saanjah* (The Identity of Sindh) (Syed 1986) and *Nation in Chains* (Syed 1974)—to demonstrate that he was, first and foremost, an architect of an idea, not just a dissident politician.

I have adopted a qualitative, historical-descriptive research methodology for this essay. The central aim is to trace the evolution of G.M. Syed's political thought and actions over a 65-year period and analyze his role in "making" a modern Sindhi identity. The research is grounded in an approach that examines the pivotal role of charismatic and intellectual leaders in shaping historical and cultural trajectories. However, I have contextualized this framework within the broader political science theories of nationalism and post-colonial state-building, ensuring that Syed's agency is analyzed in constant dialogue with the structural forces he confronted. I focus on his intellectual consistency, proposing that his actions, from the 1930s to the 1990s, are linked by a coherent, evolving ideology of Sindhi nationhood rather than mere political opportunism.

The primary source base for this study is G.M. Syed's own extensive corpus of writings. I have conducted a close textual analysis of his key political and philosophical works, including *Struggle for New Sindh*

(Syed 1949), *Paigham-e-Latif* (Syed 1975, 23), *Sindhu Ji Saanjah* (Syed 1986), and *Nation in Chains* (Syed 1974). I use these texts to map the *evolution* of his ideology, from his early arguments for provincial autonomy to his later, fully-articulated case for national independence. I treat these writings not as mere political pamphlets but as foundational documents of nationalist ideology-building. This textual analysis is supplemented by an examination of his published speeches, letters (Syed 1985), and court depositions (Syed 1995), which provide a more immediate window into his political strategies and responses to contemporary events. This approach allows me to trace the critical link between his private intellectual work and his public political persona. To contextualize this primary source analysis, I employ a range of secondary sources, including scholarly monographs (Ansari 2005; Jaffrelot 2015; Khan 2005; Korejo 2000) and contemporary journalistic accounts (Paracha 2015; Soomro 2009). This secondary research serves two purposes. First, it allows me to triangulate and verify the historical events that Syed was responding to, such as the specifics of the Manzilgah incident or the internal political debates during the One-Unit period. Second, it situates Syed's intellectual project within the larger scholarly debate on eth-nationalism, preventing an analysis that detaches him from the wider historical forces at play. This dual approach—a textual analysis of the "architect" and a historical analysis of the "architecture"—allows me to build a comprehensive case for Syed as the central figure in the making of modern Sindhi identity.

The Making of a Nationalist: From Reformer to Pakistan-Sceptic (1930–1947)

G.M. Syed's political journey did not begin with high politics but with grassroots social reform. In this, I suggest his path was classic, moving from social consciousness to cultural preservation and, finally, to political nationalism. In the 1920s and 1930s, his primary focus was the emancipation of the Sindhi *Hari* (peasant) from the oppressive *jagirdari* (feudal) system. His founding of organizations like the Abadgaar Association (Farmer's Association) and his deep involvement in the Sindh Hari Committee were attempts to create a socio-economic backbone for the Sindhi populace (Korejo 2000, 22). He understood that a populace trapped in serfdom could not form the basis of a self-aware political community. This early work was foundational; it gave him an intimate understanding of the Sindhi rural landscape and established his credentials as a leader invested in the *qaum* (nation/community) rather than just his own land-owning class interests. This focus on the rural masses and their upliftment remained a constant theme in his politics for the next sixty years.

Simultaneously, Syed championed the first great political-identity struggle of his career: the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency. This campaign, which culminated successfully in 1936, was the crucible of his political thought. I argue that this was not merely an administrative reshuffling; for Syed, it was an act of national liberation. He argued forcefully that Sindh's unique cultural, linguistic, and economic interests were being systematically subordinated to those of Bombay (Syed 1968). This fight forced him to articulate, for

the first time, a coherent argument for Sindh's distinct political identity. It was also during this period that he became involved in the tragic Masjid Manzilgah incident in Sukkur in 1939. This communal riot over a disputed building, which pitted Muslims against Hindus, deeply affected Syed. I suggest he drew a crucial lesson from it: that religious identity, when weaponized, could be used to shatter Sindh's internal social harmony, a harmony he believed was rooted in a shared, syncretic Sufi culture (Ansari 2005, 45-48).

It was this complex understanding of identity—socially conscious, politically autonomist, and culturally syncretic—that he carried into the Muslim League and the Pakistan Movement. His support for the 1940 Lahore Resolution, I propose, was based on a radical, and perhaps wilful, interpretation of its intent. When the resolution spoke of "independent states" in the plural, Syed interpreted this as a sacred contract guaranteeing a post-British future where Sindh would be a fully sovereign entity, allied but not subservient to other Muslim "states" like Punjab (Syed 1949, 94). He became the chief proponent of Pakistan in Sindh, believing it was the only path to escape the dual hegemony of the British Raj and the Hindu-dominated Congress. He saw Pakistan not as a monolithic Islamic state, but as a confederation of free nations.

This conviction led to his most famous pre-partition act. In 1943, he famously authored and passed the resolution in the Sindh Assembly supporting Pakistan—the first of any province in India. For him, this was a vote for Sindh's *liberation* into a new, voluntary federation (Touqeer et al. 2016, 12). This act, I argue, was the high-water mark of his belief in the "Pakistan" project. He had, in his mind, secured a legal and moral guarantee for Sindh's sovereignty. This is precisely why his break with Jinnah and the League's central command was so swift and total, beginning almost immediately after.

The rift, which began as early as 1944, was not, as I see it, a mere power struggle over election tickets. It was a fundamental ideological collision. Syed saw the League's central leadership, particularly Liaquat Ali Khan, attempting to impose a centralist, Urdu-speaking high command over Sindh's autonomous provincial League (Syed 1949, 112). He saw his carefully negotiated "contract" of autonomy being torn up before Pakistan was even created. When Jinnah sided with the centralists and marginalized Syed in favour of more compliant local leaders, Syed correctly perceived that the Pakistan being built was not the confederation of sovereign states he had envisioned.

I suggest he saw the new state as a new unitary power that would simply replace Bombay's and London's hegemony with that of Karachi and Lahore. He was expelled from the Muslim League in 1946, a political outcast on the eve of the creation of the very country he had, in his own way, helped to create (Korejo 2000, 65). This pre-partition expulsion set the template for his entire post-1947 career: that of the principled defender of Sindhi autonomy against an ever-centralizing state. He entered the new nation of Pakistan not as a founding father, but as its first and most prominent dissident.

The State against the Nation: The Post-Colonial Struggle (1947–1995)

The creation of Pakistan in 1947 did not resolve G.M. Syed's anxieties; it confirmed

his worst fears. I argue that the immediate post-partition years were the period in which Syed's autonomist stance was irrevocably forged into a coherent, oppositional nationalism. The "original sin," in the view of Sindhi nationalists, was the dual decision in 1948 to make Karachi the federal capital and simultaneously separate it from the province of Sindh (Ansari 2005, 90). This act was a demographic, economic, and symbolic catastrophe for Syed's vision of Sindh. Economically, it severed the province from its premier port and industrial centre, handing its revenues to the central government. Demographically, it turned Sindh's largest city into a reception centre for millions of Urdu-speaking *Muhajirs* from India, fundamentally altering the province's ethnic balance (Jaffrelot 2015, 146). Symbolically, it demonstrated that the new state would not hesitate to dismember a foundational province for its own administrative convenience.

Syed's vocal opposition to this move was immediate and uncompromising. He saw it as a direct colonization of Sindh's most valuable territory by the new central government, which he increasingly viewed as being dominated by a Punjabi-Muhajir alliance. His protests, however, were met with a harsh response from the state he had so recently supported. His opposition to the Karachi separation earned him his first of many house arrests at the hands of the Pakistani state (Korejo 2000, 78). This established a pattern that would define the rest of his life: Syed would articulate a defence of Sindhi rights, and the state, regardless of its civilian or military character, would respond by imprisoning him. He would ultimately spend over thirty years of his life in prison or under house arrest (Memon 2013).

The second, and more profound, blow was the "One-Unit" policy of 1955. This scheme, which I suggest was a blatant act of political engineering, dissolved the distinct provinces of West Pakistan—Sindh, Punjab, NWFP, and Balochistan—into a single administrative entity, "West Pakistan." The stated goal was to create parity with "East Pakistan" (Bengal), but its true purpose, as Syed immediately recognized, was to institutionalize Punjabi demographic and bureaucratic dominance and to permanently erase the autonomous political identities of the smaller provinces (Khan 2005, 132). For Syed, this was the ultimate betrayal of the Lahore Resolution's promise. It was no longer a matter of compromised autonomy; it was an act of political annihilation.

It was this policy, I argue, that transformed Syed from a dissident *autonomist* into a nascent *nationalist*. He became the leading voice of the anti-One-Unit movement in Sindh, organizing, writing, and agitating for the restoration of his province. He formed the Sindh United Front as a political platform for this resistance. His defiance, which again led to long periods of imprisonment, solidified his status as the *de facto* leader of Sindhi political consciousness (Soomro 2009). He had become a symbol of Sindhi resistance, and his home village of Sann became a pilgrimage site for disaffected students, poets, and intellectuals who formed the core of the new nationalist movement.

This period also defined his complex and antagonistic relationship with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. While both were Sindhi landlords (*Waderos*), I propose they represented two fundamentally different and irreconcilable models of Sindhi power. Bhutto, a brilliant populist, believed the path for Sindhis was to *capture the centre*. He sought to rule all of

Pakistan from Islamabad, believing he could then deliver resources and power back to his home province. His political genius lay in his ability to appeal to a Pakistani-socialist identity while simultaneously cultivating his image as a son of Sindh.

Syed, in stark contrast, had zero faith in the centre. He believed the centre—which he increasingly saw as a Punjabi-Muhajir construct—was irredeemable. His model was to *build the periphery*, strengthening Sindh's autonomous institutions and culture, regardless of who ruled in Islamabad. This is why Syed viewed Bhutto with deep suspicion, seeing him as an agent of the centralist state, a "Sindhi" who was willing to compromise Sindh's national interests for the sake of personal power in Pakistan (Syed 1995, 93). This clash was not just political; it was a philosophical dispute over the very soul and strategy of the Sindhi nation.

When One-Unit was finally dissolved in 1970, it was a victory for Syed's persistence, but the political landscape had been permanently altered. The 1972 language riots in a "restored" Sindh further highlighted these tensions. While Bhutto's government ultimately passed a bill affirming Sindhi as the province's official language, the violent riots between Sindhi-speakers and Urdu-speakers demonstrated the deep ethnic cleavages that had become entrenched (Zaidi 1991, 1298). For Syed, this was just another symptom of the original sin of 1947—the demographic alteration of Sindh. He saw Bhutto's "victory" as a compromised, partial measure that failed to address the root cause of Sindhi disempowerment.

Syed's political journey continued through the 1970s and 1980s, largely from his position of confinement. He maintained a principled, if strategically complex, opposition during General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship. While he shared Zia's animosity towards Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, he refused to co-operate with the regime, viewing it as a new, more brutal face of Punjabi-military centralism. His stance during the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1S83 was controversial. While the MRD's agitation was strongest in rural Sindh, Syed and his *Jeay Sindh* followers largely stayed aloof, viewing the PPP-led struggle as a fight to restore a different brand of centralism, not a fight for true Sindhi national rights (Paracha 2012). This decision highlights his unwavering, single-minded focus: his only goal was the Sindhi nation, and he viewed all Pakistani political actors, whether civilian or military, as obstacles to that goal.

The Architect of an Idea: Syed's Intellectual Legacy and 'Sindhudesh'

The 1971 Bangladesh crisis was the final turning point in G.M. Syed's intellectual journey. The violent secession of East Pakistan on the basis of eth-linguistic nationalism did not *create* Syed's nationalism, but it *confirmed* it in the most brutal way possible. He saw in the Bengali struggle a mirror of his own: a culturally distinct, numerically significant nation that was economically exploited and politically dominated by the West Pakistani military-bureaucratic establishment (Syed 1974, 49). The fall of Dhaka, I argue, was the moment Syed concluded that autonomy *within* Pakistan was a political fiction. He reasoned that if the state could unleash such violence on its own *majority* population, then the smaller, minority provinces of the new, rump Pakistan had no future at all.

It was at this moment that his political project shifted definitively from a demand

for provincial rights to a clear call for national sovereignty. He formally founded the *Jeay Sindh Mahaaz* (Long Live Sindh Front) in 1972, and for the first time, the demand for "Sindhudesh"—a free, independent Sindh—became the central, unambiguous plank of his platform (Sangi 2014). I propose that Syed's most enduring legacy, however, was not this political movement, but the sophisticated intellectual and ideological "nation-building" project he undertook to justify it. He understood that a nation needed more than grievances; it needed a *mythology*, a history, a culture, and a philosophy.

He spent his long years of house arrest—which covered most of the last 30 years of his life—prolifically writing the foundational texts of Sindhi nationalism. His home in Sann became an informal university for his followers. His 1957 speech, "The Path Not Taken," was an early example, a cultural manifesto pleading with Sindhis to save their language and literature from the encroachment of Urdu (Soomro 2004, 10). He warned that "a nation's existence is peace, then literature will be safe; but if the nation is in danger... literature will not be saved." He tasked Sindhi writers with the sacred duty of forging a national consciousness, a call that was answered by a generation of poets, writers, and students.

His magnum opus, *Sindhu Desh: A Nation in Chains* (1974), was his declaration of independence. In it, I suggest he performs his most radical intellectual act: he meticulously *de-links* Sindhi identity from the pan-Islamic identity of Pakistan. He argues that Sindh is not a 500-year-old Muslim culture, but a 5,000-year-old *Indus Valley* civilization. He traces the Sindhi nation back to Mohenjo-Daro, arguing that its defining characteristic is not the Islam of the Arab conqueror Muhammad bin Qasim, but the syncretic, tolerant, and humanist Sufism of its native saints, principally Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Paracha 2015).

This "nationalizing" of Sindhi history was a direct challenge to Pakistan's entire *raison d'être*. Pakistan's official history began with the arrival of Islam in 712 AD. Syed's history began in 3000 BC. He effectively "nationalizes" Sindhi Sufism, recasting Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai not just as a spiritual guide but as a *Rashtrakavi* (national poet) who articulated the soul of the Sindhi nation. His book *Paigham-e-Latif* (Message of Latif) argues that Latif's poetry is a political and philosophical guide for a modern, secular Sindhi nationhood (Syed 1975, 23). This "Sufi Secularism," I argue, was his most brilliant contribution, providing Sindhi nationalism with a non-theocratic, culturally authentic, and deeply-rooted philosophical alternative to the state's religious ideology.

He further elaborated this in *Sindhu Ji Saanjah* (The Identity of Sindh), where he laid out the cultural markers of this ancient nation (Syed 1986). He argued that the Sindhi character—defined by peace, tolerance, and mysticism—was a product of the Indus river, a "geographical personality" that predated and transcended all religious conversions. In doing so, he created a space for Sindhi Hindus, Christians, and other minorities within his national vision, placing them in direct opposition to the exclusivist religious nationalism of the state.

He created, in essence, a complete "national idea" for others to follow. He provided the historical narrative (Indus Valley), the cultural-philosophical core (Sufism), the national poet (Shah Latif), the political grievance (One-Unit, Karachi), and the ultimate goal (Sindhudesh). This

intellectual framework proved far more durable than his political parties, which were often fractured and repressed. He had successfully "imagined" the community for others to be born into, ensuring that his ideas would outlive him and the state's attempts to suppress them.

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that Ghulam Murtaza Syed was the single most important architect of modern Sindhi ethno-national identity. His 65-year career was a coherent and relentless project to define, defend, and institutionalize the idea of Sindh as a distinct nation. I have traced this project from its origins in the social reform movements of the 1930s, through his conditional support and eventual rejection of the Pakistan Movement, to his post-partition resistance against a centralizing state. His early struggles against the Bombay Presidency, his crucial interpretation of the 1940 Lahore Resolution, and his immediate opposition to the separation of Karachi were all part of a consistent defence of a "Sindh-first" political vision. I have suggested that the One-Unit policy was the crucible that forged his autonomist politics into a true nationalism, and the 1971 Bangladesh war was the final confirmation that led him to advocate for an independent 'Sindhudesh'.

I propose that his most profound legacy is not his political agitation but his intellectual production. By meticulously crafting a national history for Sindh rooted in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, and by defining its unique cultural character through the secular, humanist philosophy of its Sufi saints, Syed gave Sindhi nationalism its "sacred texts." He provided it with a soul, a history, and a philosophy that was distinct from, and often antithetical to, the official state ideology of Pakistan. While his political goal of an independent Sindhudesh was never realized and he died under house arrest in 1995 (Amnesty International 1995), his intellectual project was a stunning success. The demands for provincial autonomy, the primacy of the Sindhi language, the cultural pride in Shah Latif, and the deep-seated "Sindhi question" that continues to challenge the Pakistani federation today are all the direct and enduring echoes of the lifelong battle waged by this one unquiet, indomitable man.

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